

punk planet

ISSUE #50

JULY & AUGUST 2002

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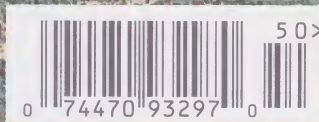
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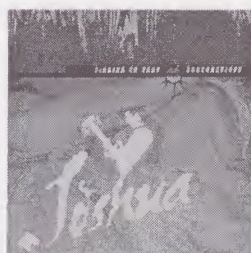
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"Chicago is a self-contained atmosphere. It seemed like everything we needed was here and the music industry wasn't. I think for the people in **the Mekons** it became easier—even for the people that never moved here—to do stuff."

- 8 Mail
- 14 Columns
- 28 Interviews
 - the Mekons*
 - Chic-a-Go-Go*
 - Jason Farbman*
 - the Molemen*
 - Hamster Man*
 - Homocore Chicago*
 - Martin Sorrondeguy*
 - Venus Zine*
 - Aaron Patterson*
 - Heaven Gallery*
 - Tortoise*
 - Salim Muwakkil*
 - Hot Doug's*
 - James Mumm*
 - Bloodshot Records*
 - The Dishes*
- 108 Fiction
- 112 DIY Files
 - Early to Bed*
- Reviews
- 122 Music
- 136 Books
- 144 See Also

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intro50

Love letters take many forms: little notes slipped into pockets; scented tomes folded and sealed with wax; simple icons that read "I♥U"; steamy e-mails zipping through the ether. This love letter takes the form of a magazine.

It is a love letter to a city that I have grown up in and that *Punk Planet* has come of age in. A love letter to a place I hold close to my heart. A place that is infused into every page of the 50 issues we have put into circulation. Chicago is a geographic location unlike any other—one that has certainly touched you too, even if you don't know it.

Punk Planet began as an internationally distributed magazine. It was never supposed to be a regional zine, and as a result there was never a particularly Chicago-centric focus to it. In fact, long-time readers of the magazine will remember that we used to have four different addresses listed at once. Only one of them was in Chicago.

But the magazine has always been produced here—even if contributors and other folks helping out were more spread out—and as a result, the ethics of the Chicago underground have permeated the magazine since its inception. For that reason, I thought a fitting way to mark our 50th issue would be to cover Chicago.

What are the ethics of the Chicago underground? Well, since they're not formal rules it's hard to put down on paper. But it generally seems (and you'll hear this echoed throughout the issue) that in Chicago, you do your work in an honest fashion. You don't fuck people over. You

treat people with the respect and the honesty you would want them to treat you with. In Chicago, you do your work because it's the work that defines you. If you can go home knowing that you made an honest wage, you can go home proud. It's an old-fashioned idea, but one that often gets lost in the toil of the 21st Century. In the Chicago underground, however, it's an idea that has still held strong. That's probably the main reason that I love this place.

There are a lot of reasons *not* to love Chicago too, and we chronicle many of them in this issue as well—lack of affordable housing, police brutality, corrupt politics . . . Simply listing the complaints against our mayor-for-life (that's his mug that Jon Langford painted on our cover) could fill a few issues. But you take your bad with your good anywhere you hang your hat. Lemons beget lemonade, as they say.

Even though this issue is Chicago-focused, special attention *has* been made to keep it interesting for those of you that don't live here (that would be almost all of you). The folks in this issue are people you either already know—or at least *should* know. The solutions they offer and stories they tell are universal.

Unfortunately, there is some bitter-sweet news that goes along with the Chicago theme. This is the last issue to have the reviews edited out of town. Since our start, reviews have always been assembled outside our base (the reasons for doing this are long and boring). But over the last six months or so I've felt more and more that it was necessary to make our Chicago office

the last stop for all the content in the issue (again with the long and boring reasons). As a result, the reviews are moving into the chair next to mine.

This would be an exiting moment if it wasn't coupled with the sadness of losing Eric Action as reviews editor. Eric has been doing this for so long I've lost count (what is it—five years?) and has put up with a thankless task much longer than I certainly could have. He's going to stay on as a reviewer and is passing the torch to current reviewer and *PP* contributor Kyle Ryan. Thank you Eric for your years of tireless work.

Finally, you just shelled out an extra buck for this issue. Our new cover price is \$4.95—up a dollar from last issue. It's a sad reality that publishing a magazine like we do is an expensive proposition—even with a bare-bones staff and economical printing. As the magazine distribution world becomes more homogeneous (mirroring, of course, the retail front), more and more charges fall on the publisher's shoulders. And ultimately, that cost has to be passed along to you, the reader. If an additional dollar is too much to think about bearing, you could always subscribe—the subscription rate is staying four dollars an issue. Hopefully, in whatever way you see fit, you will continue to support us.

Thank you for 50 amazing issues. Let's hear it for 50 more.

DAN

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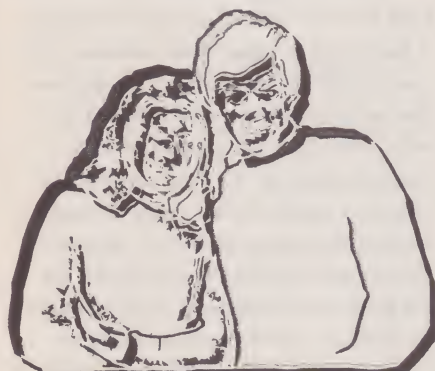


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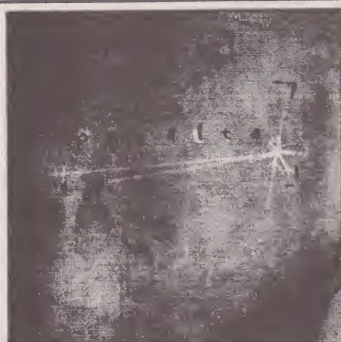
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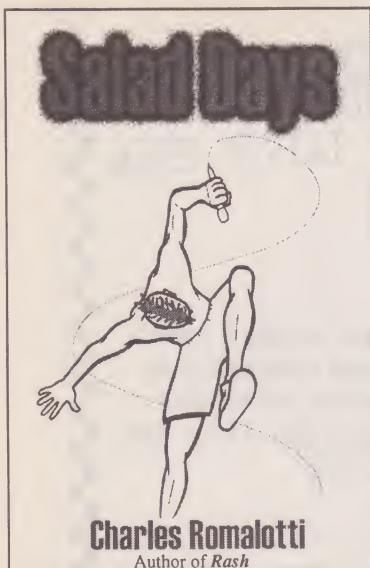
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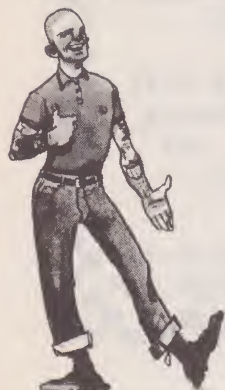
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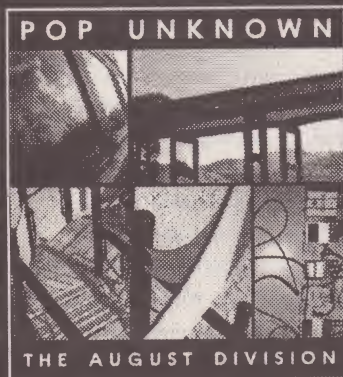
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► Vagrant, capitalism, and the need for new terms.

Punk Planet,

It seems to me that your article on the state of Vagrant Records ["Business as Usual" PP49] highlights a problem that is much bigger than just one label and a handful of bands. That problem is the problem of definition. It's high time we ask ourselves who we are, what we are, and most importantly, what we stand for.

People like Steve Albini, and more recently Joel Schalit, have been talking about the "indie" scene as a microcosm of the larger music industry. Compare it to children playing dress-up, give it the Marxist treatment and call it a petit bourgeois system, whatever—these are very similar diagnoses of one disease.

But let's not kid ourselves too much. The "scene" we all take part in (to varying degrees) is a business. It's part of a larger capitalist economic system and, for the most part, must abide (perhaps unfortunately) by those rules. A band makes music, a record label packages and markets the music, a consumer purchases the packaged music. Income is generated, distributed as profit, and reinvested as capital. That's capitalism whether it's being carried out by G-7 Welcoming Committee, Alternative Tentacles, Epitaph, Vagrant, or Interscope. Even the most equitable and socially responsible record label is guilty of benefiting from said system, like it or not.

The question, therefore, is not whether or not American indie labels can exist outside of the capitalist system. They can't. The question is how much they have to dirty their hands in the process and still be successful. By "successful" I do not mean rich. I am not referring to SoundScan numbers or Billboard charting. I'm referring to the ability to main-

tain a steady release schedule by selling enough "units" to recoup expenses and generate enough income to fund future releases, pay artists equitably, and provide the label's employees with fair wages. By all appearances, Vagrant is having an awfully hard time striking a balance between striving for success and sidestepping greed.

That said, the derogatory talk of the increasingly business-oriented aspects of running independent labels is really frustrating to someone who is trying to run one of said labels. Label owners and/or managers *must* have a fundamental understanding of how their business works in order to make sure that no one is getting the short end of the stick. Talk of marketing and using "the right" press and radio people is part of the game.

That sounds so crass, but change the framework of discussion a bit. "Are we going to advertise in *Punk Planet* or *Magnet* or both?" "Should we use Holiday Matinee or Blue Ghost to do press for us this time around?" One quickly realizes that we're not talking Enron here. We're talking about magazines we read and people we hang out with. It's just another way of getting attention for the music you believe in enough to plunk down tons of your hard-earned cash upon.

But at what point do you cross the line? Is it when you go from Blue Ghost to Girlie Action? Or maybe when you switch from Girlie to Nasty? The answer is clearer in terms of distribution. Lumberjack to Mordam is not a much-maligned leap. But Mordam to Caroline gets dicey. And Caroline to Interscope? Now you've gone too far, my friend! But why? As Trevor and Kyle thankfully point out, Caroline is really just a front for EMI. TVT actually follows the textbook definition of indie, but Fat Wreck Chords, mentioned in the article, does not as they are distributed by Sony subsidiary RED

(same goes for Victory).

After a while, all of these definitions and boundaries become more of a headache than they are worth. And honestly, when people lament the fact that the scene has become less political and more like the system it once challenged, why should it be such a surprise? One side wants more ethics and one side wants more access. Jane likes the fact that Borders carries her favorite band's CDs because there's no local shop that carries indies. Johnny sees barcodes on his favorite band's CD as the mark of the capitalist beast—a sure sign that they've sold out (despite the fact that even the smallest label can get a barcode).

The dividing lines have become increasingly arbitrary, making a case like that of Vagrant so important to watch. When we (record labels) start manipulating SoundScan numbers to attain higher Billboard charting, I don't care what anyone says—we've lost our souls. Such an act cannot be justified by simple explanations of working the system to the benefit of "cool" bands. If that type of act is not right in the case of someone like Mariah Carey, it should be even more derided when we do it.

So I return to the suggestion that a radical reevaluation is in order of what we do as well as how and why we do it. Should we exist as farm clubs for major labels? Should we work with bands with major label rockstar aspirations? Should we deal with contracts? And if yes, what kind of contracts? Certainly not cookie-cutter copies of the major label "seven percent mechanical royalties on MSRP \$14.98 after all expenses are recouped" version!

I don't claim to have the answers, but I do know that the time has come for such a reevaluation, especially in light of the recent wildfire success of bands like Saves the Day and Alkaline Trio. We must all be prepared for what is to come and not let it catch us off-guard. Success can empower

us or it can crush us, as we've seen far too many times before. If we stand together (and we stand prepared!), we've got a shot of not only surviving the onslaught, but thriving. Let's prove ourselves better than the major label system by proving ourselves *different*! Otherwise, we all face the fate of Vagrant Records. Successful or not, no one wants their ambition to land them in a courtroom, arbitrating contracts while bands are on tour without records to sell or a label to back them. Those bands and the music they make are what got us to this point in the first place and it serves us well to remember that fact.

Scott Shields
Your Best Guess

► Vagrant ain't so bad.

Hi—

I work at a "mom and pop" record chain in the triangle area of North Carolina called School Kids Records. I just read the article on Vagrant records ["Business as Usual" PP49] and I just want to bring up a few points.

1. I think even though the forward at the beginning tried to paint the article as being fair to all sides, you really made it out like Egan was a villain and somebody worth our contempt. Just because he has more ambition and drive to make some "punk" bands (which aren't really stylistically or ethically punk—it was pretty clear most of them just wanted to rock out and make a lot of money anyway) huge in America does not make him a sellout or worthy of contempt. I would rather have kids listening to Saves the Day and the Get Up Kids all over the country than listening to what is pushed down their throats now. I say more power to him, and if he can make money that is great. Not everybody is satisfied to live out of a garage and run a label

of a few bands that are only good enough for a select crowd of "cool" kids. Varsity is good. And if you cannot do it better, then you shouldn't go to such great lengths to make the man out as "bad". I felt sorry for him having to deal with T.V.T. Anybody who kept up with Trent Reznor in the late '80s knows what a crap label they are.

2. My main point though—which is a better one than the first—is that you guys glossed over a huge, huge, huge issue, that I know a little bit about because a record store clerk: Price. All the CDs and vinyl coming from Vagrant sport a modest to low price: 12.99 to 14.99. All the CDs coming from Epitaph recently are almost 18 dollars. But you paint Epitaph out in a pretty good light. Same thing with Fat Mike and his label of uninspired and boring bands. They just want money and the product is sub-par. (Also, the band No Motiv has been around for years, if people still won't buy their CDs maybe Egan knows better than to sink lots of money in a band that really isn't that good to begin with. One of the major problems in the underground is an influx of crap bands.)

People do not understand that price is the most important thing. The White Stripes didn't think out their new deal that well and their CD have gone up to about 16 bucks (we only sell our CDs at about a dollar over cost, and less than that when they first come out). People are not gonna want to buy the CD if it is too expensive (duh, Napster, major labels, stall in the music industry?). I think you should examine the "major label" practices of Epitaph and Fat Mike and not make Egan out to be such an evil bastard just because he wants to be successful. At least he offers some level of quality for a decent price while giving the want to be rock stars what they want.

Anyway, besides all of that I love your

magazine and I love how in the book review section somebody actually criticized Noam Chomsky. Keep up the good work. Hope none of my spelling is that bad because I am in a hurry.

Joshua

► Pot ain't so bad.

Hey there—

I have been a long time reader of *Punk Planet* and have had strong reactions to many things that have appeared in the magazine over the last few years, but the overwhelming absurdity of Larry Livermore's column in issue #49 has finally forced me to write a response.

Livermore's assertion that pot is more dangerous than narcotics is the single-most misguided sentiment ever expressed in *PP*. To belittle the struggle of narcotic addicts is an insult to those who fall victim to the evil clutches of serious addiction. If Livermore doesn't like weed anymore, that is of no concern to me. But to compare spacing out while talking to Iggy Pop to the horrors faced by narcotic addicts is both ignorant and overwhelmingly obnoxious. I know many people who smoke pot on a regular basis (myself included) who are under no delusions that pot makes anyone smarter or cooler. I also know people who struggle with serious substance abuse which has wrecked their lives and the lives of those they love. It's possible to live a productive and safe life as a pot smoker. As a narcotic addict, life itself is secondary.

Maybe Larry should have smoked before sending in his column. Perhaps then he would become conscious of his idiotic ramblings.

Steve Lowenthal

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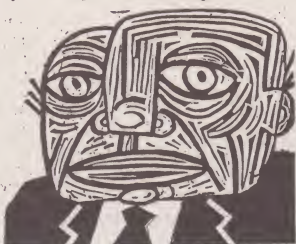
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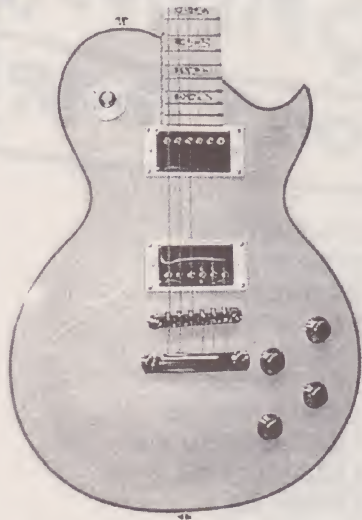
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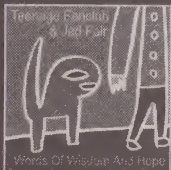


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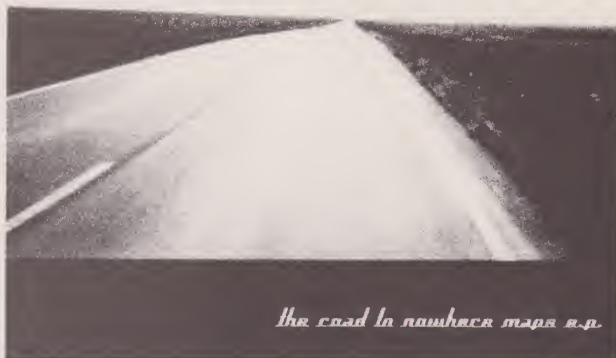
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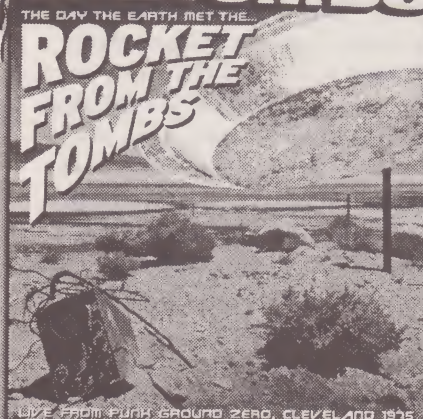
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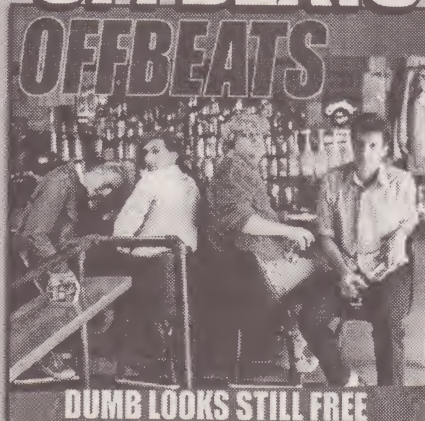
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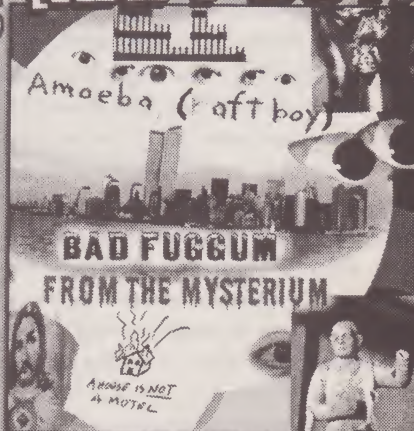
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I've been having recurring dreams about my teeth falling out. A common dream theme, I'm told, and one which Freudian psychoanalysts say is

representative of deep unresolved issues from childhood. Jessica Hopper tells me that losing teeth in dreams represents fear of loss of control or fear of powerlessness, however, in my case I think it's more straightforward actual anxiety about losing my teeth. I have not been to the dentist in nine years; the last time I went I had my wisdom teeth out, which rocked, as I stumbled into the waiting room and loudly proclaimed to all in attendance, blood dribbling from my gauze-puckered lips as I did so. Still, neither the kind dental staff nor the copious amounts of narcotic sedatives proscribed to me elicited a return visit. I have done the best I can to follow the DIY guides to oral hygiene occasionally printed in *Maximumrocknroll*, but the dental news has been growing grimmer, and two new pieces of oral innuendo which have come to my attention of late have been almost enough to cause me to throw in the towel and get wooden dentures, George Washington-style. #1) piece of information is that apparently fluoride is a carcinogen. Yes, friendly fluoride, number one ingredient in all non-twig-based toothpastes. It gives you oral cancer, which just makes me livid. Here I've been, regularly forgetting to brush my teeth over the last decade on three out of five evenings, running out of toothpaste and neglecting to replace the tube for month-long spans, all the while wracked with feelings of the deepest, most profound guilt and anxiety about my negligence, and now it comes to light that these lapses may in fact be my only hope of not having to have my jaw surgically removed one day. Had I been the diligent thrice-a-day brusher I'd always liked to idealize myself as being, I'd probably be dead now. All that anxiety for naught! You're

doomed if you do; you're doomed if you don't. That is the way of modernity.

Will-to-live-crushing information bomb #2) is that flossing is, in fact, more important for maintaining healthy chompers than brushing is. People, why wasn't I informed of this until now? My oral hygiene regimen has always functioned under the premise that brushing is the seat belt and flossing is the auto-inflating steering column-mounted air-bag—a nice bonus feature if you have that sweet a set of wheels, but the common man is surviving just fine in Honda Civics with seat belts and no drink holders. Now it come to light that all this time I should have been shirking on the brushing (which I have been doing, at least), because, in addition to lowering my chances of contracting cancer of the lips, this negligence could have cleared up time and energy for the plaque-fighting mainstay of flossing! I have been bamboozled, and now am haunted by prophetic dreams in which my teeth crumble from my spongy skull and clatter to the floor, and in which I am reduced to gumming cream of wheat and pureed banana paste.

As a result I've been flossing maniacally as of late, trying to catch up for lost time, and have succeeded as of 11 a.m. this morning in making my dreams reality, dislodging a large chunk of tooth while engaged in a vigorous floss assault on my pearly whites. The tooth shrapnel floated in my mouth for a moment before I picked it off of my tongue, assuming it to be a dislodged bit of food particle. It looked like an Indian arrow-head, or a miniature shark's tooth, and even now, many hours later, I can feel the gaping gap in the side of the lower bottom front tooth, where this grainy bit was torn from, a small cavernous trench, perfect for hiding a cyanide pill or smuggling a small stash of plutonium. There is no sensation quite like the vertiginous feeling of having a dreamscape suddenly leap across the boundary of sub-consciousness and into the plane of harsh waking reality. There is a dislocation, a sudden dizziness; you feel the urge to pinch yourself, to reassure yourself that it's only a dream even as the cold tiles of the bathroom floor, the slight sting on the cheek of a fresh shave, and a million other minute sensations align to

impress upon you that, no, this is no dream, this is reality. The teeth are falling from the head like withered autumn leaves. This turn of events is devastating, horrible, and, once recovered from the initial, reeling shock, I've found all of my dental hygiene efforts brought to a crashing halt. I know that it's only a matter of time before the rest of the teeth begin raining down from my sad grimacing face, and what then?

I've decided to spend the evening involved in a deep and robust depression session, but my self-pity is interrupted by a phone call from Jessica "party" Hopper, who shares none of my sorrow and woe, and is, in fact, calling to invite me out to a party. It figures. This is the strange, paradoxical nature of my life in Chicago: the city offers only decay and despair, dilapidated infrastructure and demolished, crumbling facades, with the dull rapport of gunshots and the sanity-shredding muzak of waiting on hold with Ameritech as soundtrack. And then on the other hand, you can never fully embrace the apocalyptic conditions because there is always a party to go to, there is always one more collection of bright and beautiful youngsters to offset the doom. That's the nature of urbanity, I guess: we're drawn to the death, we look good against it, it offsets our vitality, our essential aliveness.

Against my better judgement, I agree to go. Before long, I find myself in a car full of people, going to a party on the south side of Chicago. As the car detours from one location to another, zigzagging across the vast and expansive wasteland en route to pick up hipster after hipster, each of whose buttocks knifes deeper and deeper into my legs as the hipsters pile in, clown-car-style, forming a gargantuan and horrific human pyramid atop my lap—claustrophobia sets in, panic feelings. "Where is this party?" I want to know. "Pilsen," says Jessica. I calculate the number of sharp and pointy butt-bones, which might be awaiting a ride between here and there. Chicago is vast and sprawling; the distance from downtown to Pilsen is the equivalent of driving the length of several towns in North Carolina, like going from Durham to Greensboro, which no one ever does except in case of nuclear evacuation or, in my case, once as a teen in order to attend a Judas Priest concert. However, I get the sinking feeling

that nothing quite as spectacular as that awaits me at the end of this journey, in fact the most likely terminus on this ride is paralysis from the waist down. "Whose party is this?" I demand. "What's the occasion?"

"We don't actually know the people having the party," the front-seat enclave admits. "We heard about it on make out club dot com."

"Make out club dot com?" I say. "Stop the car. Now."

They drop me off downtown, near a blue line stop.

"Are you sure—?" ask the hipsters. "I'm fine," I say. "Really, I'll just take the train home. Or walk. Or something. I'd really rather. It's fine." I'm clearly out of sorts, in fact actually near to having a fit and yelling, but I do my best to contain myself. Losing composure is not going to help the situation.

"Are you OK?" I am asked, very sincerely, by front-seated (and rumored mayoral candidate) JR Nelson. What can I say? That I am having a dental crisis and that the idea of a party themed around people's affinity for a web-site based on their obsession with each others' mouths brings my loss of control and powerlessness issues to the fore? "I just don't really feel like—I mean—I just want to go home," I mutter. It's a little awkward, and I feel bad being the despoiler of the gung-ho party atmosphere, but I need to get away. I can't go through with this.

They barrel off, in hot pursuit of some joy de vivre, and I am left to wander around the downtown for a while. It is deserted, enshrouded in a light drizzle. The buildings are majestically lit, ruined, amazing. I wonder, why don't I come down here and walk around by myself all the time? But, of course, you can't plan something like that; you'd never do something so sane and pleasant of your own volition. Left to my own devices, I sit in my room and stare at the walls and obsess about my own unraveling. But here, suddenly, I'm plucked out and placed in the greater context of the epic, rotting mouth of Illinois, out in the drabness of the cold Chicago death-night, the miracle mile, walking around the block in silence, checking out the desolate city at night. I can't believe I live here.

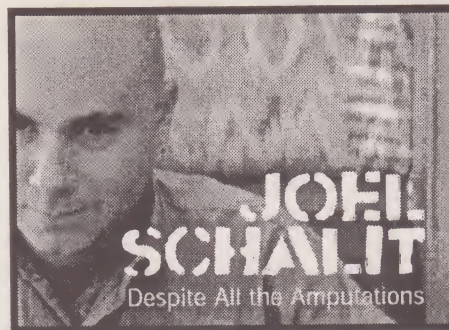
In the blue line stop, underground, I wait for the train with a platform full of other people. On a billboard across the

tracks, a woman leers at me lasciviously, mouth open invitationally, tongue distended as she licks her lips. Her gaze is carnal, totally make out club. A small blemish on her tongue is circled. "It's tiny now," the billboard cautions. "Don't let it grow into oral cancer."

When the train comes it is only two cars long, already packed full of people, and the waiting passengers on the platform herd forward, mechanically, pushing and thronging their way through the doors, cramming their elbows and asses into the compartments. I try to push forward too, feebly, but my heart is not in it, and I straggle at the back, until the doors hiss shut, and I am left alone on the platform, defeated. The blue line train shudders and hisses forward, rumbles into the tunnel, and is engulfed in darkness. I can still see the gleaming red lights and the faces of the passengers, literally pressed up to the back window, squished into place. And then the train breaks down, the car stops with a metallic shudder, and sits inert, just inside the tunnel. I can still make out the expressions of the people inside, pressed against one another, poker-faced, all perfectly still, trapped in the train. What can they do? Panic? Express feelings of powerlessness? Lack of control? What's the point? I recognize in them that dull look of acceptance, the implicit understanding that there are higher forces at work here, forces bent on making every decision the wrong one, the same evil deities who pulled the bait and switch with the fluoride, returning now to insure that the most eager to get on the train, the ones most in a hurry or most certain of their right to crowd out the less assertive and take their place in the human sardine can of mass transit, would make the WRONG decision, would be the ones who end up stuck in the tunnel, the ones who don't make it home after all. If I had been a little more pushy, a little more assertive about my destiny, I would have elbowed my way on, I would have triumphed and boarded the blue line, and my reward for diligent ass-kicking would have been to be stuck in a suffocating sarcophagus of carbon monoxide and body odors.

You can't win! How can I even contemplate going to the dentist? How can I even think about oral hygiene and health in a city like this? This is the city of death, where even the right move is the wrong move. Best just not to brush your teeth, best not to try too hard. "I can barely chew my food, let alone pay my rent," as Three Mile Pilot said—You're doomed if you do, you're doomed if you don't. When every move is the wrong move all you can do is relax and accept it, hoping that between the party you missed and the train you didn't catch, somewhere in there you'll catch a moment of reprieve, an unexpected and pleasant walk through the crumbling scenery, and you'll notice how beautiful it is.

Postscript: I have a new zine out: burn collector #12, \$3 ppd to PO Box 641157 Chicago, IL 60664. At \$3 for 80 l'il pages, it's not as good of a deal as Punk Planet, but then again, you don't have to look at pages and pages of ads. Then again, maybe you like the ads. Then again, this is an ad. Damn. You really just can't win.



Stoned out of my gourd, I'd just wandered into my dorm when I heard the sound of laughter flowing out of the half-open door

of my room. Eager to get settled in before our enforced nightly study hall began, I climbed the stairs to the second story of our residence hall wondering who was hanging out in my quarters.

Peeking around the partially opened door, I could see several guys in hooded sweatshirts, pants, dropped, facing my bed. They were laughing really loudly. I could smell the faint whiff of cheap beer in the air. Then, it dawned on me. As a trickle of yellow liquid flowed towards me across our uneven, cheaply laid out linoleum institutional floor, I realized that they were peeing on my bed.

Shit, I thought, as I sneaked away from my secret vantage point. *I hate boarding school. What nerve! What did I do to deserve this?* Outraged, I ran outside. Far too high for my own good, I stood there on the verge of tears, wondering what the hell I was going to do about this. With 20 minutes to go before study hall, I realized that the only option at my disposal was to go back upstairs and stand up to these assholes.

Walking through my door, faking complete aloofness, I found four juniors hanging out on my roommate's bed, crushing empty beer cans, looking incredibly pleased with themselves. When they saw me, they all slapped each other high fives, and said "Hey Joel, what's happening?" while they giggled and smirked. "Been busy reading poetry books?" asked my roommate Mark, a muscle-bound football player from Canby, Oregon whose only claim to fame was that his German father owned a Mercedes dealership in town.

"No Mark," I replied in a business-like voice, hoping my eyes were not bloodshot. "I just took a long walk after eating dinner, and now I'm going to get ready to do my homework."

"Well," said Mark's smirking friend Dave, a soon to be infantryman in the Marines Corps, whom I was later to find out served as a military advisor in El Salvador, "I guess we better get going." But before Dave left, he shot me a sharp look, wondering if I was going to notice what he and his friends had done to my bed.

Standing there listlessly, waiting for me to do something, everyone fell silent. They wanted to experience the gratification of watching me flip out in front of them. After all, how often is it that you see a 16-year-old react to a politically motivated bed-wetting? Finally, without bothering to take stock of the scene of the crime, I addressed them.

"Look guys, I already know what you did. I came up here earlier, and caught a glance of your friendly circle jerk around my bed. Do you want me to go tell the school chaplain I found you boys beating off together like a bunch of queers, and peed all of yourselves because I surprised you in the act? Do you want me to

make it clear that you guys don't know the difference between masturbating and peeing yet? Or do you want to apologize to me for what you did to my fucking bed?"

I was obviously angry.

My schoolmates stared at me in complete shock. No one said a thing. After a couple of minutes of silence had gone by, Kurt, the smallest one of them—the son of a logging executive who lived somewhere in Western Washington—spoke up.

"Are you calling us a bunch of faggots?"

"No," I replied. "I'm telling you that you're a bunch of dick-headed dough brains who can't see beyond your own cocks. Can't you idiots figure out that you peed on more than just my bed?"

None of them had anything to say. They just stared at me, as though they were waiting for an answer. Delighted beyond words, I delivered the final blow.

"The reason you pissed on my mattress is because you find it offensive that I use an American flag for a bedspread. The problem is that you urinated on your own country's national emblem, which is a hell of a lot worse than me using it to make my bed look like a GI's coffin coming back from Vietnam."

"Is that what you were thinking?" asked Kurt, looking hurt, sounding completely surprised.

"Yes," I muttered, pulling out a copy of Husker Du's *Landspeed Record* LP. "See this fucking picture? That's what I had in mind."

• • •

I never told our Resident Advisor what had happened. I felt vindicated enough in having humiliated these guys. But I swore to myself that I was going to move out of this room as fast as possible, and find someone else to live with for the rest of the term.

"Go get me another mattress," I told my roommate as his friends filed out for study hall. "There are a few spares downstairs in the basement. I'll mop this shit up before the RA gets here to check in on us."

We worked fast. By the time our dorm's assigned study hall monitor had checked in on us, we'd manage to clean everything up, and replace my bed. The only thing that remained to be taken care of was that I needed a new set of sheets and a blanket.

"What are you going to sleep in?" asked my roommate rather apologetically, fingering through his wallet, wondering whether he could afford to replace my bedding.

"Don't worry about it," I responded. "I have a sleeping bag I can use for a while..."

Then, out of nowhere, my attempt to conclude a replacement deal for my destroyed bedding was interrupted by the most awkward of otherworldly wails.

"Can you hear that?" asked Mark, pointing to my side of the room. "What the fuck is going on?"

Pressing my ear against the wall, I answered "I have no idea. It must be one of your friends trying to beat off again."

"Fuck you," replied Mark, a huge grin spreading across his face. "It sounds like someone strangling a goat to death," he said, laughing.

Delighted we'd finally moved on to something beyond this

evening's difficult proceedings, the wailing next door proceeded to get louder. Curious as hell as to what was exactly going on next door, we pressed our ears to the wall trying to figure out what it was we were actually hearing.

"I have absolutely no idea," I told Mark. "I'm going to go next door and find out."

Quietly I opened our door, and scanned the hallway to see if the RA was around. Luckily, he was nowhere to be found.

Quickly moving to my right, I knocked on our neighbor's door several times, but no one answered. The noise emanating from the other side of the wall was so loud, it was clear that whoever was making it could not hear me. Finally, nervous about being discovered outside of my room during study hall, I let myself in.

Closing the door, I could see a pair of small brown bare legs to my right. Someone was standing on the sink closest to the entrance. Looking up, I found my neighbor Sharam, a 15-year-old student from Iran whom everyone called Birdman, because of how often he threw himself off of the dorm's second story balcony onto the couches on the first floor. Transfixed by his image in the mirror, Birdman stood there staring at himself, Walkman on, singing at the top of his lungs in Farsi.

Still fairly stoned, I burst out laughing at this hilarious site. Birdman still didn't notice me. Finally, I put my hand around his ankle, and motioned that he come down from the sink and take his headphones off. Shocked by the feel of my cold hand on his ankle, Birdman dismounted, took his headphones off and asked, "What you want?" in broken English.

"What the fuck are you listening to?" I asked him, gesturing at his Walkman.

Birdman pulled out a Motley Crue tape. "Shout at Ze Devil," he replied, handing the cassette to me.

I screamed with delight. "You must be joking!" I howled.

"No maaan," said Birdman, excitedly. "I just got it this afternoon, and can't turn it off. Its amazing!"

Unfortunately, our discussion had been found out. We could hear the sounds of the RA coming down the hall. Birdman shot an angry look at me, as though I was responsible for getting him into hot water. "Shit man, shit," he said, as he fastened his headphones over his ears. "You got us in trouble."

By the time the RA arrived, Birdman had decided that he'd rather keep on listening to the 'Crue than get caught. "Where's Birdman?" asked the RA on duty, as he scanned the empty room.

"He jumped out the window," I replied.

Three weeks later, Birdman was expelled from school. We never found out what happened to him. As for me, I switched rooms into a ground floor suite across the way with two other students, a quiet Egyptian math whiz from Cairo, and an anemic church-organ playing Missouri Synod Lutheran who slept with a Bible beneath his pillow.

The only times any of us ever spoke to each other was when they asked me to listen to Venom's *Welcome to Hell* on my headphones.



Never keep up with the Joneses. Drag them down to your level. It's cheaper.

—Quentin Crisp

Even the Chamber of Commerce would

admit that February isn't the best time to be in Chicago, but for reasons that mostly begin with W for Weakerthans, there I was.

I long ago fled Detroit at least partly because of the weather—not as much wind or snow but colder than Chicago—but for some reason, winter doesn't bother me much anymore. Hell, you're talking to someone who goes on holiday in Iceland. To be fair, though, Icelandic winters are considerably milder than Chicago ones.

The tentacles of global warming seem to have reached the shores of Lake Michigan (formed, by the way, when the entire region was entombed in glaciers during the last Ice Age), because this particular February was not at all a harsh one. It was possible to go for a leisurely stroll without hitching up the sled dogs and wrapping up in a mukluk. Which is what we decided to do in a post-midnight fit of hunger.

We were staying in a yuppie enclave of Lincoln Park, a part of Chicago I'd never been in before. For those of you who don't know it, Chicago is huge. Massive. It goes for miles and miles, and even natives wouldn't claim to know the whole place. Wait, I take that back. Some natives would claim to know the whole place because, well, that's how some Chicagoans are. But they'd be lying.

The point is, I didn't have a clue about which direction might be the best to head in search of food. I was pretty sure there weren't any terribly dangerous neighborhoods nearby to wander into, but as with most American cities, it was possible that we could walk miles and never see anything but gas stations and apartment buildings.

Never mind. Fueled by the belief that I had an instinctual knowledge of, as Aaron Cometbus puts it, "how cities work," and driven by a reluctance to admit that I didn't know where I was going, I picked a direction and off we trudged. It was dead nice for February. Not more than a few degrees below freezing.

Everything was closed, of course, except for a couple joints that specialized in all meat, all the time (We're both vegetarians. What did you expect? You're reading Punk Planet, for crying out loud.). But if I have one quality that outweighs my arrogance, it's my stubbornness, so on we went. We were headed in a generally northwestern direction, and I started to wonder if the next road sign might read, "Welcome To Wisconsin."

I exaggerate, of course. We hadn't even gotten out of Hipsterville. (I'm not sure whether Chicago has one Hipsterville, several contiguous zones of Hipsterism, or random pockets of it all over the city) when we discovered an all-night diner. It featured an extensive vegetarian menu and was

full of people who looked in danger of breaking out into flagrant hipsterism at the drop of an indie record onto your nearest college radio turntable.

The food was decent—for Chicago, the California snob in me has to interpolate—and we lingered there a while. Around 2 a.m., in came yet another crowd of hipsters. I did a double take. "See that guy over there," I told Mike. "If he were a little older and a little heavier, he'd be a dead ringer for the world famous punk rock record producer Mass Giorgini."

Ho-hum, said Mike's expression, and you can't blame him. How exciting can it be for someone to almost sort of look like a record producer you've never met? Another half-hour passed, and then the guy who almost sort of looked like Mass Giorgini walked over to our table and let it be known that he was indeed Mass Giorgini. Yep, he'd lost some weight, which is easy enough to accept, but how in the hell had he lopped several years off his age?

Oh well, that's the sort of thing that can happen in Chicago in the middle of the night. No, not that a famous punk rock record producer who you haven't seen for a couple years turns up looking so much younger and lighter and healthier that you don't recognize him, but that you could go wandering at random in the middle of the night through a city where you hardly know anybody, and manage to wind up sitting two tables away from a long-lost friend who also doesn't live in Chicago and just happens to be visiting for a couple days, etc. etc.

Actually, I'm lying. Things like that don't happen just in Chicago. They happen everywhere, even in bigger cities like New York or London, because no matter how big the city, people of like minds and interests tend to group together in communities of interest. It no longer seems to matter whether I'm in Berkeley or Detroit or Seattle or Reykjavik; wherever I go, I keep running into the same people, or people just like them.

Which puts me in mind of a recent Saturday afternoon here in London. They were showing a film about the Washington, DC punk scene at the über-trendy Notting Hill Arts Club, and a couple of DC-type bands (have we reached the point where emo and indie scenes can have their own tribute bands?) were playing. The price was right—free—and a few friends were going, so there I was.

The old-timers—i.e., 30-somethings who are still a couple decades younger than me—stood there grouching about all the young scenesters who "must have come in from the suburbs" and probably "don't know a thing" about the real history of punk rock. Then someone—apparently Mark Anderson of DC Positive Force—got on the microphone and introduced the film.

There's something about an amplified American accent—yes, I know I'm being snobby, but I've lived here long enough to modulate my Yankee nasalities and aw-shucks Midwesternisms so that heads don't turn and stare the moment I open my mouth—that cuts through a room full of mumbly and demure Brits with the subtlety of a klaxon crossed with a foghorn.

This fellow wasn't a particularly obnoxious American—in fact

he seemed like a very nice one—but he did say something that got my dander up. He was talking about “how great” it was to be “in your neighborhood,” and something to do with the cover of a Clash record featuring a photo from the 1976 riots at the Notting Hill Carnival.

I’d think he’d been misled by the name of the club. The actual site of the riots was over by my house, while the club is in Notting Hill Gate, not proper Notting Hill at all. For those of you whose knowledge of Notting Hill is limited to the Hugh Grant-Julia Roberts film, be aware that at one time it was home to much of London’s black population; those who still remain in the area were somehow magicked out of the film in post-production.

Mark seemed quite enthusiastic about the riots, to the point where I thought I’d ask him if next time we could have them on his street instead. He went on to speak out against gentrification, apparently under the impression that the riots had been some sort of grass-roots protest against a phenomenon which, if it existed in the 1970s, was seldom known by that name.

In reality, the riots—Clash song or no Clash song—were more about a spate of gang robberies getting out of hand at the Carnival, the police moving in to shut down the Carnival and people who were determined to keep on partying (and/or robbing) fighting back. My then 70-year-old aunt and a group of her friends were knocked down and robbed by a rat pack of teenage boys, and she sure as hell was no gentrifier: she’d lived in Notting Hill since long before any of her attackers were born.

Regardless of what did or didn’t happen back then, though, no sane person would deny that Notting Hill has now been thoroughly gentrified. The flats across the road where my aunt used to live, the ones the Council was going to bulldoze because nobody but squatters would live there, are worth close to half a million bucks apiece. Madonna and her cronies dine out in the sleek little bôites off the Portobello Road.

The price of my own flat has tripled in the last five years, but I’m not exactly happy about the changes in the neighborhood. In fact, I hate it. Why? For much the same reason I originally loved it: it’s too much like Berkeley. The whole ruling class-meets-underclass thing makes for too much friction and too much crime. The rich people treat the place as an open-air drugs market and all-night party town; the poor people treat it as a place to prey on rich people. And as an open-air drugs market and all-night party town.

For every person in a neighborhood like mine—or in Chicago’s Wicker Park or San Francisco’s Mission District—who complains that it’s becoming “too gentrified,” there’ll be another to complain that gentrification isn’t coming fast enough. One guy is afraid his rent will go up and he’ll be forced to move; another guy has bought a house in a depressed area in hopes it would “improve,” but is getting sick of finding used condoms or passed-out junkies on his doorstep.

Political punk rockers are especially outspoken on the subject of gentrification, which is ironic, since the arrival of punks in

your neighborhood is one of the surest signs that rising property values and Starbucks are not far in the future. I remember reading one particularly ludicrous discussion in which a girl called Kim Nolan argued earnestly that white people should not move into “old-school Mexican” neighborhoods like Chicago’s Pilsen (Pilsen? Mexican? I thought it was a kind of German beer.).

After some agonizing she was prepared to make an exception for herself because she speaks Spanish, has a Hispanic boyfriend, and agitates “on behalf of Cuba,” but as for others, it was their responsibility to live “where white people live.” A similar argument has been going on in San Francisco’s Mission: it’s overrun with punks and artists and quasi-political blowhards who are outraged that white people (apart from themselves, of course) are moving into that “historically” Hispanic neighborhood and driving up property values.

Leaving out the obvious racism (the notion that there should be such a thing as “white” or “Mexican” neighborhoods, let alone the notion that the presence of Hispanic people automatically keeps property values down), the whole notion of gentrification as expounded by lefter-than-thou “community activists” too often boils down to: “Anybody that moves into my neighborhood after I did is a gentrifying yuppie bastard.”

Neighborhoods and cities are not static, lifeless things. They are living, breathing organisms, like the people who inhabit them, and the essence of life is change. Some neighborhoods get better, some get worse. People move from one place to another, sometimes out of necessity, sometimes out of desire. It’s always been that way, and the main cause of trouble is when well-meaning social engineers or demagogic politicians try to interfere with the process.

The “historically Mexican” Mission District was, until 50 years ago, “historically Irish,” and a hundred years before that, “historically Native American.” The Lower East Side has been Ukrainian, Jewish, and Puerto Rican, before turning into Hipster and now Yupster Heaven. Notting Hill has had various incarnations as a middle-class suburb, black ghetto, and London’s answer to the Haight-Ashbury before mutating into its present hybrid of poshness and squalor.

Of course it’s sad when your old neighborhood changes to the point where you feel like you don’t belong there anymore. But what’s the answer? Try to stop change in its tracks? Keep your neighborhood a slum so that yuppies won’t want to move in? Support your local criminals so that it’s too dangerous for anyone who might own something worth stealing?

It sounds crazy, but it’s not far from the extremes some people are willing to go to. And on one hand, you can’t completely blame them. Faced with a choice with living in a slum or having to leave town altogether because of a lack of low-priced housing, people feel desperate. Poverty can do that to you. But so can a poverty of imagination.

The truth is—and some doctrinaire leftists will have a hard time swallowing this—that gentrification hasn’t been all bad. Big

swathes of cities that were once barely habitable have been reclaimed. Houses that were once falling down have been repaired; businesses have opened in streets where there were none. For the first time in decades, populations are rising instead of falling in many major cities.

A lot of good that does, you might argue, if the newly repaired houses are all too expensive for normal working people and the new businesses are all coffee shops and boutiques. But isn't it possible that this is a result not of too much gentrification, but too little? Look at Chicago: some previously affordable neighborhoods have gone all cutesy and overpriced, and others look in danger of doing the same.

But stack those neighborhoods up against vast swathes of the city where little or nothing has changed, where hipsters and yuppies are seldom seen, and where living, while perhaps cheap, isn't particularly easy or pleasant. Where most of the houses have barred windows, where there are no shops or other local businesses, where almost no one walks the streets after dark.

People live in places like that because they don't have a choice. Which means, of course, that anyone who does have a choice, someone who gets a better job or a raise, for example, is out of there like a shot. And where do they go? Why, to one of the gentrified or soon-to-be gentrified neighborhoods. Can you blame them?

Punks should understand that better than anyone, because as I've noted before, they're usually the shock troops of gentrification. They're the ones who spot an area with cheap rent and a lot of "character," who come flocking in and drive the rents up, and then start complaining about everyone else who follows in their footsteps.

Fleeing the sterility of the suburbs, they seek out a more meaningful life in the inner city, but don't seem to understand why someone who isn't a punk or an artist might feel the need or right to do the same.

What if, though, most of the city—or the suburbs, too—weren't as crappy as they are? What if the punks stayed where they were and fixed up their own neighborhoods, if, instead of banding together with their fellow lifestyle rebels in a couple narrow quadrants of the city, continued to live side-by-side with factory workers and cops and single mothers, the whole spectrum of humankind that makes up a real city as opposed to cute little Bohemian toytowns?

That might mean a longer bus or bike ride to the nearest vegetarian co-op or falafel joint. It might also mean making it worth somebody's while to open a vegetarian co-op or falafel joint where there wasn't already a whole street full of them. It might mean coming into daily contact with, even cooperating with, people whose values and politics differ greatly from your own, but you could always share the benefits of your wisdom and experience with them. What the hell, you might even learn something yourself.



The past year and a half has ushered in more eye-opening realizations about myself as a social creature than the previous 25. There is

none too much truth in saying that you think you know it all when you're young. When I was 16 I thought I was wise and learned and had my shit together. At 20 or so I could look back and realize I didn't know shit then and, even though I thought I was a pretty sharp gal, I knew that a few years down the line I would see that I was a jackass. Now at 26 I realize I understand less than I ever did about other people and am just beginning to learn about myself.

Much of my ruminations came from conversations with a few friends/acquaintances, none of whom I am actually that close with. I've traveled and toured with my friend Thomas quite a bit over the past four years and we have always shared in-depth personal conversations. One night last year, we were hunkered down on the steps of a house in Iowa City and he said one sentence that spawned much future brooding and self-analyzation. "You know, I don't mean to sound harsh but you are a really bad judge of character."

He went on to give me numerous examples of times I greatly misjudged other people's characters and, of course, he was right every time. He thought the reason I always had such problems with relationships was because I always picked the wrong people to be with, being unable to accurately judge them. I have often thought that there are several ways to know a person: as a family member, friend, co-worker, roommate, bandmate, or lover. In each case, usually you see only certain sides and characteristics of that person. I've often realized too late that someone that is a good friend can be a terrible roommate or lover, or that a great co-worker turns out to be a shitty friend, and so on and so forth. Especially when it comes to lovers, I've made exceptionally bad choices. I was always looking at surface qualities such as a person's interests or lifestyle or political ideas. Given that my lifestyle and politics are fairly unconventional, I guess I thought the best road to take was to look for a "good match". Maybe I still haven't quite gotten down what I should be seeking out in someone else. I suppose you can never know for sure and that is one of the more interesting challenges in life. But I'm pretty certain that searching for someone whose description in a theoretical personal ad fits mine isn't the way to go. The same was always true for friends but I just thought I needed a partner that was just like me. Anyone else, I thought in my closed mind, would not be able to truly understand me.

I also came to the conclusion through conversations with Thomas and my friend Brad as well as my own observations that there are some undeniable differences between men and women. Regardless of any talk or illusions of equality of the sexes, we are all brought up a certain way and it is somewhat naive to think that we can cast off our gender conditioning by merely thinking we have.

Of course I don't think that every man fits perfectly into the male gender role or all women into the female one. But I have met so few men (I could probably count them all on one hand) in my lifetime that were on an emotional level that I would need to be happy. Yeah, "looking for love in all the wrong places"—that's me to a tee.

I always thought of myself as being a forgiving person and giving others the benefit of the doubt. Thomas asserted that I was not careful enough, that I was too quick to give my trust. I think I was willing to overlook serious "flaws", if you could call them that, in someone's character if that person was superficially similar enough to me. Even if someone was incapable of communication or treated me badly, I always thought, 'well, no one is perfect and I need to accept a person for who he is if I care for him.' Now I realize that what I was doing, in effect, was short-changing myself. Granted, a search for perfection is a search in futility. But, I think I owe it to myself to raise the bar a little higher and not just look for someone who seems like he would understand me because we're so alike, but who actually understands me and my moods and fears, etc. because his heart is in the right place and in tune with mine.

This is all roughly tied in to some other insights afforded me by an acquaintance, Arwen. I met her for the first time last summer when I stayed with my friend Mike, who lives with her, for a few weeks. One night at a bar, she and I were talking about relationships and I was relating all my past troubles to her. Suddenly she said something along the lines of, "You're a challenging person and I could see that a lot of people would be intimidated by you. And I tell you what; you were a challenge for me. You don't appear to follow any rules and at first I interpreted it as rudeness. But now I see that you function by your own set of rules and principles that make you comfortable in any setting and gives you a kind of self-confidence that is very rare. And now I think that's pretty punk rock." I was really surprised, almost taken aback, by what she said and went back to her and Mike's place to mull it over. She articulated in just a few seconds a major part of my character that I had always somehow overlooked or underestimated. I was never really the kind of person that did a lot with others. I never walked to class with other people like most other kids or went out drinking with a crew, etc. My whole life, I've spent the majority of my time alone and engaged in solitary activities like photography, reading, and writing. I was a pretty social person, but only when I chose to be. I never really felt like I fit in with any one crowd of people or circle of friends.

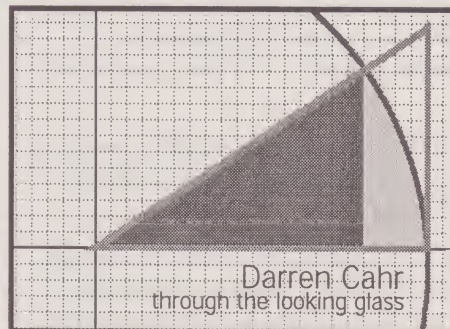
I don't know exactly how it came to be, but I think Arwen was right. I always considered myself to be pretty individualistic, but I don't think that one word accurately describes this strange bubble I seem to live in. This writing finds me on a ferry to Finland, five weeks into a European tour with From Ashes Rise, and Arwen's words are striking me clearer than ever. I've noticed so many things about myself in the past five weeks; having been forced to share (often very enclosed) spaces with anywhere from four to 15 other people at all times. It is not the first time by any means that

I've done this but somehow it has been different this time. I can't quite explain it but one guy that is with us, Bernd, who I've encountered several times in my travels, also noticed. "I don't know what is different from the other times we met but you seem to always be sitting in your own world, content to be just writing in your journal." I'm definitely going through periods where I just crave privacy and my own space, which I never really cared about before. But I'm also noticing a lot of sensitivities I have to certain behaviors that I'm pretty sure most people don't have. Most of this has to do with how very little gestures that people make or things people say, whether thoughtful or thoughtless, can affect my mood. I think I'm much less adept at dealing with other people and am much more of a loner than I always believed I was.

But I'm saying this at 26 and am sure I have a lot more to discover about myself, my quirks and flaws. I am sure I still don't know shit. And it's been a long time coming but I think I have finally found someone that can understand and accept my moods and strangeness and am ever so grateful to that person. As Brad has said to me several times, the things you have to work the hardest for are the things that you should appreciate and hold dear to you most.

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Soundtrack to this column: *From Ashes Rise, Dead Moon, Tragedy, From Ashes Rise, From Ashes Rise.*



WASHINGTON D.C. — Today, senators approved long-pending and highly controversial "truth in government" legislation,

designed to force all governmental institutions at the federal, state and local level to actually tell the truth to the citizenry.

"This will be an impossible piece of legislation to comply with," complained Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R. Miss), a long-time opponent of the bill. "How on earth is the government supposed to function when it has to tell people what it's actually trying to do."

If the bill is signed into law, as expected, the most immediate impact of the bill on everyday life will be a series of statements to be released by every government agency, clarifying what is actually going on. For example, it is expected that the following statements will be issued soon after the signing ceremony, which is expected next Thursday:

The Department of Defense will admit that 70 percent of its weapons systems are useless pork that some congressman or another got into the budget because that system was in their district. "To

tell you the truth, all we need are some guns, a few helicopters, some big planes and some bombs," says one DOD source. "But Congress keeps giving us these useless weapons systems that often don't work very well, cost a lot of money, and end up being shelved after a few years anyway. Hell, the best thing we have is the B-52, which we last bought in 1962. If we cut out the pork, we could give \$50 billion back to the people every year, pay our soldiers more, and improve Medicare without undermining our defense one bit."

The Department of the Interior will admit that it doesn't give a rat's ass about conservation, which is why it has permitted large logging and mining companies to lease huge chunks of federal land for pennies an acre for decades. "It would be one thing if we were actually getting market value for this land," says one high ranking official with the Interior, "if that was the case we could use the money to protect other lands, or improve already existing parks. Instead, we basically give it away to companies that don't even try to fix things when they leave, ruin the forests and strip mine the landscape." On a related note, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, a division of the Interior Department, will also admit that the government never actually intended to keep any of those treaties with various tribes of Native Americans. "We stole it from them, fair and square," said one official. "What, did you think we were going to return Manhattan?"

The State Department will admit that U.S. efforts to achieve peace in the Middle East have always failed because, according to one official, "quite frankly, we hope that the Jews and the Palestinians eventually all kill each other. The peace process tends to slow that down."

The Department of Homeland Security will admit that it has done absolutely nothing since September 11, 2001 to make anyone any safer. Nothing. At all.

The Department of Transportation will admit that although car companies are well aware of how to make cars that have higher fuel efficiency levels, at the urging of unions afraid of losing jobs and car companies afraid of losing profits, the department has not attempted to raise fuel efficiency standards to the point where it would accomplish anything. "Everyone knows how to make a fuel cell car right now that gets 60 miles per gallon and barely pollutes," says one DOT official. "But there's less money in it, and fewer jobs, so why on earth would we encourage it?" On a related note, the DOT will also admit that it would rather build highways than improve urban rail systems. "Look, we want everyone to move out of the cities eventually anyway—you don't need a car in the city, and we want everyone to own a car. Be reasonable here."

The Department of Education will finally admit what everyone has long suspected: the only relevant statistic in determining whether schools are good is whether parents give a shit about their local school. "In school districts where the vast majority of parents really value education and get involved in the day-to-day education of their children, kids do well, no matter how much money is

spent. If parents read, their kids are more likely to read. If you build a nice new school and the parents are all taking Oxycontin, zoning out and ignoring their kids, the kids won't care and won't learn, regardless of whether or not there's a new pool in the building. It isn't rocket science, you know."

And finally, the Department of Justice will announce that no one has ever really taken seriously the notion that the death penalty is applied fairly. "We're not sure how many people at the state and federal level have been executed despite being innocent," says one official. "However, we're pretty sure that it's under 500. And We're pretty sure that most of them were pretty bad people anyway, so no great loss."

The truth in government movement has next targeted other large social institutions, including organized religion, the entertainment industry, and corporate America. Watch this space for future investigations into what is really "true."



rip it up.

jessica
hopper

Not unlike the hardware store, the fiction section at Myopic Books and most Led Zeppelin songs—the downtown Chicago skyline

makes me want to fuck. Driving up from the southside, north on Lakeshore, into downtown, at night, with the infinite blue black majestic of the lake on the right, pressed up against the gleaming grids of the illuminated, megalithic buildings; high metal towers cozied next to the stoic (the Ebony Jet Building) and historic (the Hilton hotel—see '68 riots)—it feels like you are driving on the edge of the earth. You can fuck for days on that kind of beauty.

• • •

It is almost midnight and my neighborhood is empty of most human traffic, save for boys cruising in lowered cars with neon chasing lights around the license plates, deep-seated on a lean, who crane to see what I am doing. I am on my skateboard, rolling imperceptibly slowly, down the side of the street, facing the wrong way on the one-way. I am catching my breath, waiting for everyone to pass by. For the last hour, I have been skateboarding, alone, on the street, for the first time. My bangs are stuck to my head with sweat. The adrenaline makes the backs of my teeth hurt. I skate out of the residential and over to the smoothness of new even pavement by my old apartment, which sits (officially) in "Chicago's Industrial Corridor." I moved there for the desolation—maybe 30 people lived on my block, in illegal loft spaces in converted factories, bracketed between a recycling dump, empty factories whose industries no longer exist and a mammoth train bridge. My apartment was an alley-width from the primary rail

route into downtown—six lines, running commuter, Amtrak and industrial lines, all day and most of the night.

The only traffic on my street was either horse-drawn carriages heading from the stables to downtown, people dumping trash, or hookers. The underpass of the train bridge and the intersection directly next to it was a prime spot for some low-end prostitution. These ladies were more "casual" than the North Ave. bridge ladies, who parade the strip in vinyl, fur, feathers and white leather thigh-high boots. The train bridge ladies wear spandex pants under their skirts and snow boots in the winter, cotton sweatshirts and jean shorts and two-inch secretary pumps, or flip-flops in the summer. And they were friendly, mostly, and would wave hello to me. On weekends I would sit on the window ledge or fire escape two stories up, reading, watching for the ponies to drive by. On occasion, I would launch rotting fruit, bits of trash or food at cars that were obviously trolling. It made me sad when I would see an entire car full of white-hatted frat dudes, sunroof open, cruising the block endlessly, or beefy off duty cops waiting under the bridge, or school bus drivers (driving the bus!), or a guy getting a blowjob in the front seat of teal station wagon with a baby-on-board decal suction cupped to the back window. After a while I just started keeping rotten fruit on hand.

• • •

The only people who walk on the street in LA are either homeless, prostitutes or people who are walking to their cars. I was none of those. I was one of the 27 people who lived in LA that didn't drive, so I was outside often, which only served to antagonize my fear of melting to death.

Four years ago I moved to Chicago, from LA. I moved back to the Midwest because there are no trees in Los Angeles. There are some Palm trees, but they are not *real* trees, they are more like giant decorative sticks, providing shade like an afterthought. When I would go outside I would be overcome with the irrational fear of "melting". I envisioned that by the end of the six block roundtrip walk to the store, I would be dragging myself along the hot sidewalk, tongue out, like a cartoon dog in the desert.

I had been in California for three years before I returned to the middle of the country. I have no patience for a city with such unholy devotion to newness and convenience. I hated that when I told people that I ran my own business, they would ask me what it was that I *really* wanted to do—everything was impermanent, sick with the disease of never enough. Everything was a step in pursuit of seductive largesse. Success measured on your closing proximity to fame or the famous, which could be anything from hitting celebrity-stocked AA meetings to house-sitting for someone who had a re-occurring role on *Hunter*.

The 10 years prior to my W. Coast stint was spent in Minneapolis, which fostered a need for simplicity that LA could never fulfill, for Midwestern summer as seen through the scrim of my teenhood, now rendered with near-exclusivity by the Replacements *Let it Be* album. An album that in sound and aesthetic holds all my projected, fetishized notions of MIDWEST-ERN ennui. That being: Hanging on the roof of someone's

cheap apartment in between shifts at yr go nowhere job, with your friends, nothing to do but make bands, get drunk or get in trouble. Of being young and a little stupid, generations of deep blue collar angst corroborating with limited options and some vague dream of nothing too fancy; acceptance of your particulars; a mild disdain for anyone trying to surpass a certain station in life; weighted with a history that is all sweat equity and rough-edged pride. Wet with an essence that is equal parts struggle and unspoken resignation. Riding bikes and buses and walking across town. The smallness of the town looming, balanced precariously between simplifying force and oppressive, soul-crushing weight.

Of the entire time I lived in California, I only remember going to the beach two times. Once was in the middle of the night, somewhere on the open-to-the-commoners, ass-end of Malibu. I had been forced to come along with my (then) roommates of over-privileged origin, who did little other than bicker incessantly over their drugs and listen to music made by all the junkie greats. They were fucked up and yelling at me because I wanted to stay in the backseat, not populate their retarded, reasonless beach blanket pill party. It was cold and charmless, the air smelled like salt and smoke from the fires in the hills. There was no romance, no spark, nothing to "get." Just trash strewn sand and water that could kill you. The other time was the morning of my 19th birthday; I went way past Malibu, where the beach is like a spread in National Geographic. I was with some semi-unsuccessful screenwriter friend of a friend who was my acquaintance for all of two weeks, who I thought was gay but actually just wanted to get in my pants. I didn't like him so much as tolerate him, as he talked more than me, riffing at length on banal People Magazine topics. But he knew how to get to the beach, and was willing to drive me there. I just stared out the window and said my "uh-huh"s like polite amens.

My best friend JR, who has never lived outside Illinois, who says he could never leave Chicago, when I asked what his favorite thing is about the city is: "You can drive 30 miles in any given direction and yr in the middle of nowhere."

January before last, I was in LA, on business that was not of my choosing, and decided to go to the beach at 4 am to show it to some people who had never been. I took Sunset through the canyons to the PCH. All the windows down despite it being too cold, going well above the speed limit, like Maria Wyeth in a cheap rental, music loud to cover the completeness of our collective silence. The gravity, the pull of each curve in the road that I took too fast, subduing me, giving me claim to a California that had never been mine.

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PPS. You know how in Al Burian's column it says my nickname is "party"? I hate parties unless they are dance parties. That whole thing was alllll JR's idea. And Al Burian is a goddamn liar—the war is on! ©

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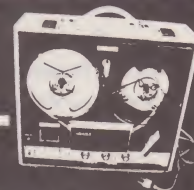


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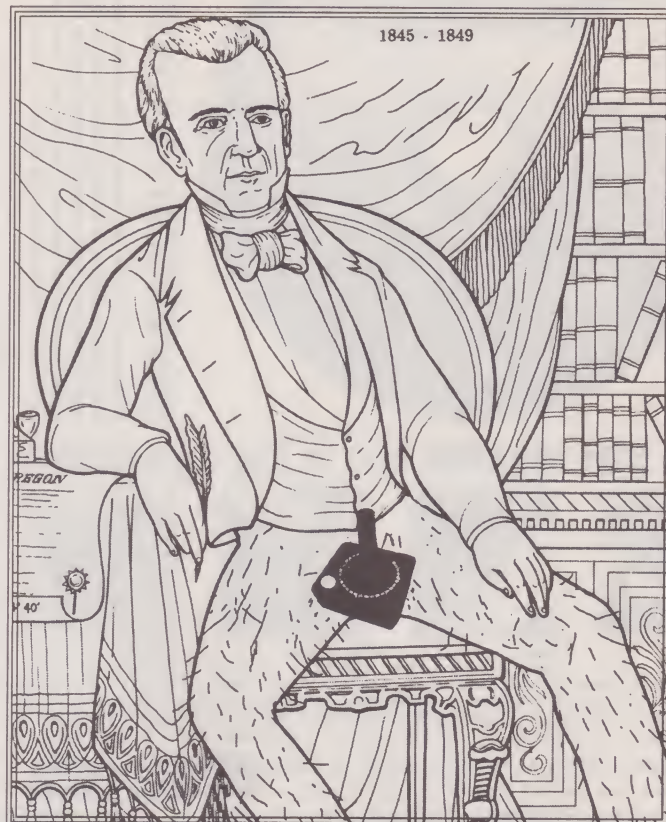
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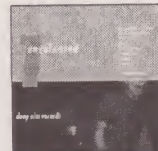
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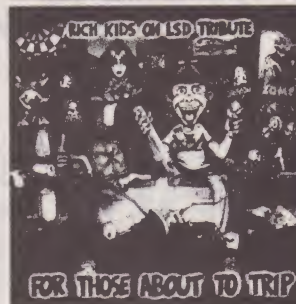
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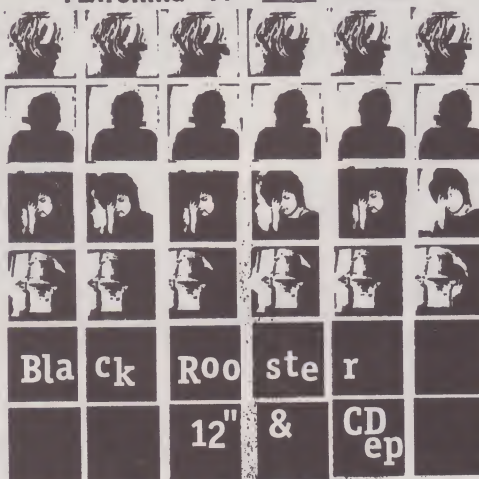
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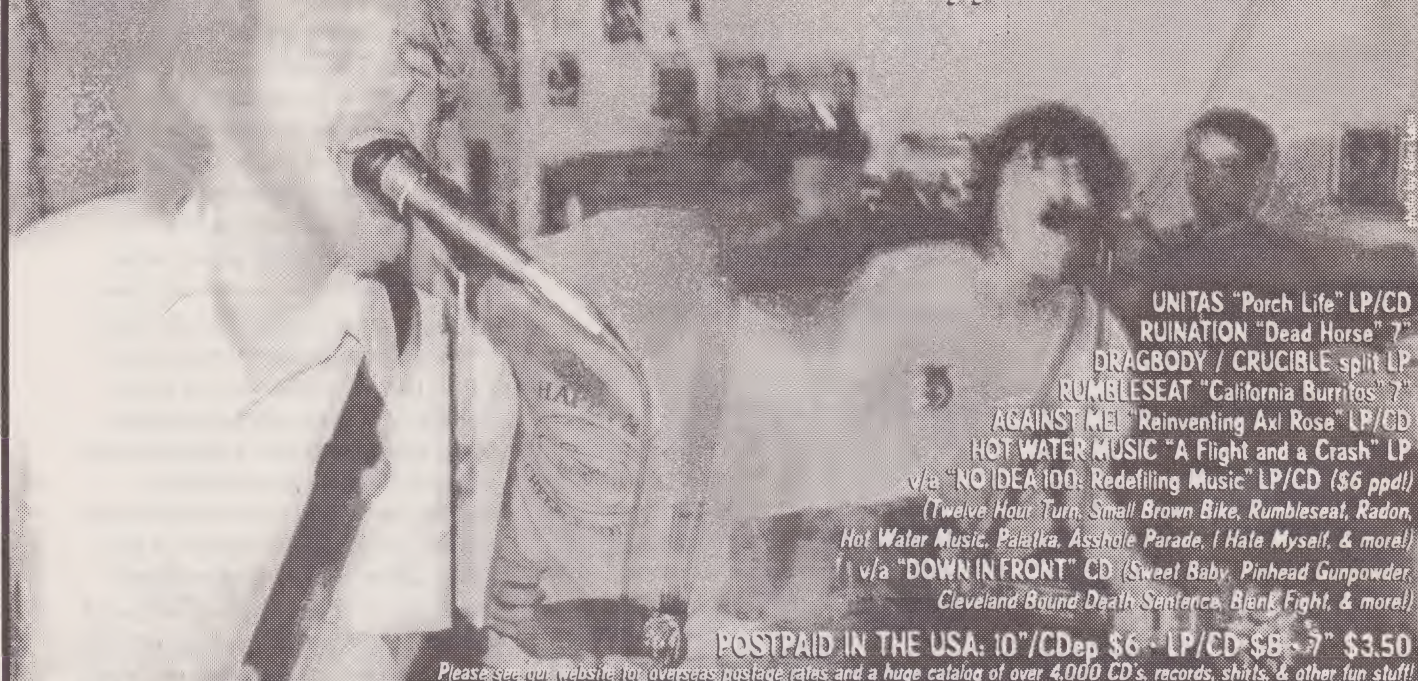
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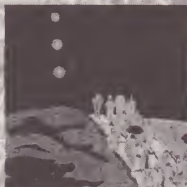
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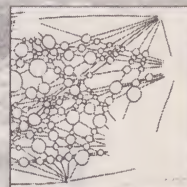
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To me, there's nothing more intimidating than having to write an introduction to a band that have been around since I was a three-year-old. When I was just mastering how to use the toilet, Jon Langford and Tom Greenhaigh (the only current original members of the band) were dropping out of school and recording the song "Never Been in a Riot"—a tongue-in-cheek, middle-finger-raised-high response to The Clash's "White Riot."

The Mekons have come a long way since they were 19-year-olds in the working class town of Leeds, England. Unlike their punk rock contemporaries (the seminal Gang of Four were also from Leeds), the Mekons have managed to stay together through countless lineup changes and three (yes, *three*) painful stints on major labels. In the process, the Mekons have transformed their sound from the anarchistic pounding of blokes who can't play a lick to a powerful group of folks versed in a wide variety of styles—from punk to country and folk to reggae. Through it all they've managed to remain some of the most down-to-earth, earnest, and honest people you'll ever come across.

So where does Chicago fit in? It's the missing piece of the Mekons puzzle. While only members Sally Timms and Jon Langford live here (the rest are spread between England, San Francisco and New York), it's the home to the one record label that's ever done the band justice, Touch & Go records, and hosts Western Sound Labs (formerly Kingsize Recordings), the studio the band uses as a defacto base and where their last seven records have been recorded. Plus, there's something about the city and the band that just fit together—like Rodney Dangerfield, neither get any respect.

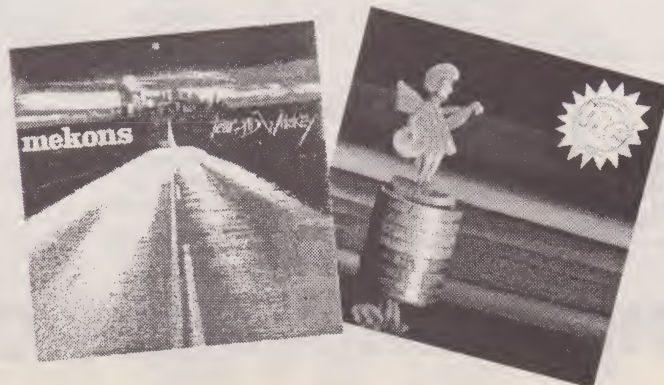
While they've been around for 25 years, and have amassed more than a dozen albums in that time, I get the distinct feeling that the Mekons have had to claw, kick, and scratch their way to the small amount of recognition they've gotten. The position of perennial underdogs seems to be one that the band has embraced (as Langford explains, more than one record has been made for "revenge"). If that's what it takes to make music as continually amazing as the Mekons have produced (even if they won't cop to just how good much of it is) then, like the second city Langford and Timms call home, underdogs the Mekons will be.

On a cold and rainy March evening, I sat down with Timms and Langford in an intolerable yuppie bar in Chicago's Ravenswood neighborhood. Over beers and margaritas the two spoke at length (I barely got a question in) about the band's history and mystery.

Interview by **Daniel Sinker**

Photos by **Michael Coleman** and **Daniel Sinker**

the mekons



You guys are an unlikely Chicago band. A British punk band from the late '70s that somehow *doesn't* break up and then, a couple decades later, ends up mostly living thousands of miles from their home. Although you're not all completely in Chicago . . .

John: We're not completely anywhere.

It strikes me as an unlikely end to that story and an unlikely home for at least part of the band.

John: I think Chicago is a bit like the north of England. It reminds me of somewhere like Manchester.

Sally: I felt like I'd moved back to Leeds when I came to live here. Because it's a second city—and while Leeds may be further down the chain than that, they both have a town feel although they're really cities. It doesn't have the cosmopolitan feel of New York. It's got a more working

class feel to it; a blue-collar feel that New York or London doesn't really have.

John: The thing about punk rock in England was that the industry took notice of it in London. Everyone thought it was a London phenomenon, but most of the interesting bands, I thought, came from outside of London. It was just that you had to *get* to London to do a gig. I think it's a bit like that for people in Chicago. But what the north of England, Wales, and Scotland share with somewhere like Chicago is that they're not that bothered—they're self-contained. ¶ I didn't move here to play music or as some kind of a career move. I moved here because I had reached the end of the line with what I was doing. We toured almost constantly in the late '80s and by 1991 we were tied up in a lot of legal problems. We had been on a major label—things were pretty screwed up. We had the wind knocked out of us on

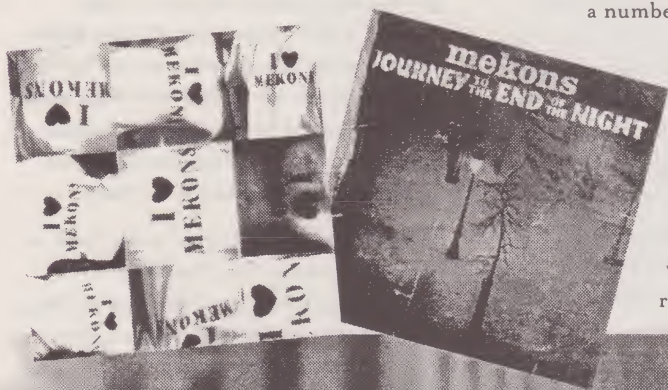
a number of levels . . . ¶ I moved over here for reasons that had nothing to do with music, but I found myself in a situation where it became apparent I was in a better environment. I was further

away from the music industry than I had been before. England being a pretty small country, you're constantly going back and forth to London to get anything done. Chicago is a self-contained atmosphere. It seemed like everything we needed was here and the music industry *wasn't*. I think for the people in the Mekons it became easier—even for the people that never moved here—to do stuff.

It seems like a really appropriate place for you guys and as a partial home for the Mekons because I see a lot of parallels between the band and the city. Always being in the shadow of something bigger; always being overlooked by everyone unless you're really looking; being somewhat in the perennial "also ran" category. I don't mean that to sound as harsh as it may, because in the same way that I think the city blossomed because of this stuff and became an entity unto itself, I also see the band shining and becoming self-sufficient, instead of having to look outwards.

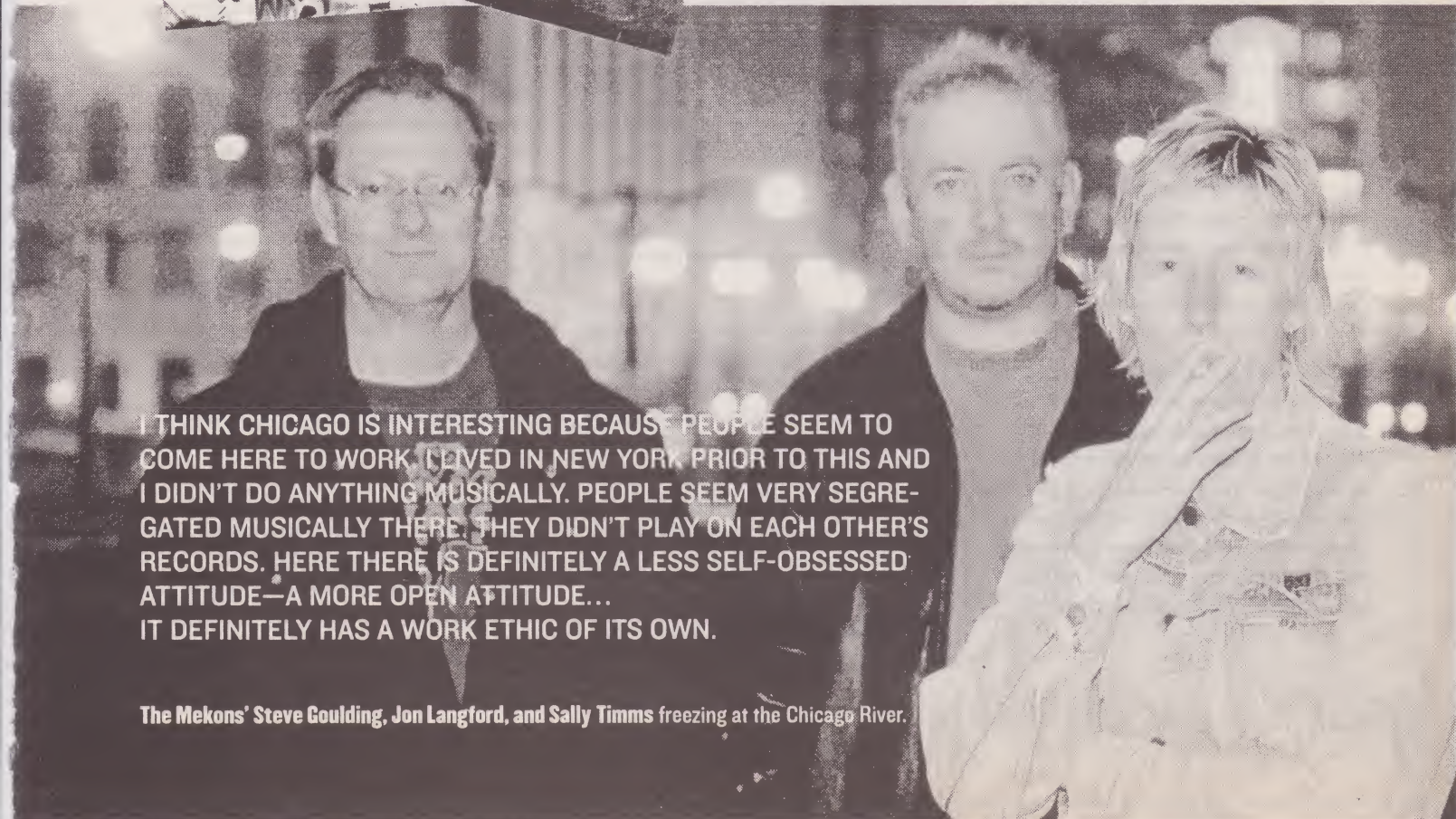
John: It's been the most interesting when we haven't had any attention from anywhere. When it's been the most boring is when we've been on major labels. We're not as perverse as some people think we are. We didn't sign to major labels to try to . . .

Sally: . . . screw with them. Everyone



I THINK CHICAGO IS INTERESTING BECAUSE PEOPLE SEEM TO COME HERE TO WORK. I LIVED IN NEW YORK PRIOR TO THIS AND I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING MUSICALLY. PEOPLE SEEM VERY SEGREGATED MUSICALLY THERE. THEY DIDN'T PLAY ON EACH OTHER'S RECORDS. HERE THERE IS DEFINITELY A LESS SELF-OBSSESSED ATTITUDE—A MORE OPEN ATTITUDE... IT DEFINITELY HAS A WORK ETHIC OF ITS OWN.

The Mekons' Steve Goulding, Jon Langford, and Sally Timms freezing at the Chicago River.



thought that it was some great tactic and wrote *endlessly* about the whole A&M saga. For some reason that became the focus of journalists and it became easy to put us in that "martyred" position. But that wasn't necessarily the case.

John: We were actually bending over backwards trying to understand *what* they wanted. It wasn't even like they were evil and trying to screw us up, it's just that a big corporation like that is basically inept and the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing. They have ways that they behave and expect bands to behave and we were just trying to find out what those were and *trying* to fit in.

Sally: We should never have been on there. The reality was that we happened to get signed by people who thought it would be cool to have us on their label.

John: A tiny little feather in their cap.

Sally: But the minute that you don't sell and they start losing money, the accountants rule and it's "Get this band out of here."

John: They didn't even really lose money on us 'cause they didn't really *give* us any money.

Sally: *Of course* they lost money. They didn't give us much money, but it costs so much for a major to release *anything*. They probably have piles and piles of our CDs somewhere. ¶ I think Chicago is interesting because people seem to come here to work. I lived in New York prior to this and I didn't do *anything* musically. People seem very segregated musically there. They didn't play on each other's records. Here there is definitely a less self-obsessed attitude—a more open attitude. People came here because it was cheap and it was central and it made it easy to just hide away doing what you did. It definitely has a work ethic of its own.

That's one of the things that I love about the city. It's a city where people just do their work. They don't crow about it and they don't go out to have people see them. It can be isolating in a way, because there isn't a real cohesive sense of this community of people working together to achieve a larger end. But at the same time, that larger end has been achieved anyway. It's an interesting

contradiction of a city. Kind of like you all are an interesting contradiction of a band. I spent much of the day today listening to everything that you all have released . . .

John: I thought you looked a bit frazzled. [laughs]

Sally: [laughs] Sorry!

John: You're none the wiser for it, are you? [laughs]

There are such distinctive points in the band's catalog that it's almost not the same band. There's hardly anything that will link one point to another other than that there's a small core of people operating as a continuum throughout.

John: It's a funny thing though. The album we just recorded is basically the same lineup, apart from the bass player, as when we did *Fear and Whiskey* in 1985. It's not just the same few people, it's the same *eight* people, which is quite a lot for a band. There would actually be quite a few more people if we were able to work in England more. We recorded this whole new album in Chicago, so some of the people that might have been involved weren't. But with the Mekons, because there are so many people, there is always room for people to drop in and out. There's enough space. It's another analogy with Chicago: it's big and unwieldy, but it works.

Sally: I think it's a band of people that don't approach music in the same way that a lot of musicians do. It's more like an ideas band, weirdly enough. People come in and out with ideas and it's very conceptual.

John: We used to always start with a title. We'd start with a title for the album and then we'd write song titles before we wrote any songs.

Sally: It's a backwards process. It's an idea that you don't sit down and strum a few chords and then build a song, it comes from a group of people exchanging ideas about how they feel about the world. Or we'll have instances where someone else will come in and pull it in a different direction, like Kathy Acker. We do not approach it in the way that most musicians approach writing an album.

John: It also often starts as a complete

joke as well. [laughs] Sally had an idea that my solo album should be called *Me*. And then it would say "recorded by me" or "all songs written by me." But then it turned into a Mekons album. It was a silly joke in the first place about what a pompous ass I am, but it turned into an album about the concept of self—self obsession and the notion of "me." "Me" seems to be really important to people, as opposed to "us" which is something that the Mekons would actually be more interested in.

That *Me* started as an idea for a solo album for you, raises a question I've had for a while: how do you know you're writing a Mekons song when you both do so much other material?

John: It depends on who's in the room. We don't really write any Mekons songs unless everybody's there. Each thing's a process. I don't think we've ever said "I've got this really good song for the next album." I don't know what the next album is going to be like or about, so how could I have a song for it? I might have some tunes that I've worked out on the guitar which may then pop out halfway through when we're writing stuff. But it's not like . . .

Sally: . . . someone comes forward with a selection of songs that then get put through some process of decision making. A lot of the time we write in the studio. I've sat in the studio while people are lifting lines from books, writing them on paper, cutting them up and handing them to me to sing that minute. That's happened a lot. The way we work in the studio is pretty scary to anyone that's not familiar with it. Everything's done extremely fast. On only one occasion that I've been in the band did we go out and tour an album before we recorded it, and that was *Rock and Roll*. That's the *only* time I can think of that we actually played the songs for any length of time before we went in the studio. Most of the time the songs are really only half or a quarter written. We don't work like a conventional band. We've never rehearsed! Never in this band's history have I known for us to rehearse more than say a day before we go on tour.

John: And it shows. [laughs] We usually start our tours in Boston. No one comes

to see us in Boston anymore . . .

Sally: Because it's crap!

John: It's a fucking big public rehearsal. By the time we get to San Francisco, though, we're fantastic. It's always *packed* in San Francisco.

Sally: I think it really is quite important that everyone who came up with the way this band operates—and it seems like the band exists almost on its own, it's something outside of us—is because they came from a fine-arts background. As a result, they didn't approach music as trained musicians, or even as people who sat in their rooms practicing guitar for years and years. These are people that came from art school. That's where a lot of interesting punk rock came from.

John: The original idea of the Mekons was that we were a band that couldn't play, but the ideas would be strong enough that you could sustain it without being technically proficient. That rock 'n' roll could be made by people that can't play really, really well. What was wrong with rock 'n' roll in the '70s was that it was being made by people who could play too well for their own good. ¶ We came from a fine art background, but it wasn't *much* of a fine art background because we formed the band when we were 19. Basically you could say we came from a high school background. [laughs]

Sally: But that's not true. You were in a radical, left-wing art school.

John: But not for very long.

Sally: No, but it was a combination of things. Punk rock was happening at that time and it really fell in with a lot of the things that you were studying. I wasn't at art school, I just hung out with them all. But it just gathered everyone up in this movement that changed the way that anyone perceived making art or music or anything else—or even fundamentally how you wanted to live your life. Essentially, it was very political.

John: It suddenly made complete sense that a lot of things were really boring. The reasons they were boring was because they were so very complacent. There was a rigid class structure to popular culture—you had

to pay your dues before you could become a rock 'n' roll millionaire. Punk was like "This is pretty pointless." It was suddenly exciting again—you had a bunch of little bands playing on a Friday night. Suddenly it was like your favorite band would be the band that was playing around the corner. You could go and see your favorite band play, rather than waiting for . . .

Sally: . . . years for them to come around to a stadium.

John: It's almost what happened in Chicago with Bloodshot. A lot of my favorite bands and the music I really like turned out to be friends of mine. Someone like Johnny Dowd or Lonesome Bob or Paul Burch or the Handsome Family, I think that's really great stuff and it was all informed by a lot of the ideas that came out of the late '70s. ¶ It wasn't like there was a rigid manifesto saying what punk rock should be, it was more about what you *shouldn't* be. You shouldn't do this and you shouldn't do that, and so you do what's left. It's a bit like DaDaism or something like that—an instance where you have to say "this is *all* fucking shit."

THERE'S NO DOUBT THAT WE'VE PUT OUT RECORDS THAT I THINK ARE REALLY WEAK, BUT FOR SOME REASON THERE'S ALWAYS SOMETHING IN THEM THAT I THINK IS VALUABLE.

Sally: You tear it all up and try and make something new.

Your background is really similar to many of the British punk bands of that era—art school, and being really young kids that didn't know what they're doing. But you're the only ones that are still here. Why?

Sally: We're too lazy. [laughs]

John: It would have been too much trouble to split up. On certain occasions, I thought we *had* split up, but I realized I was still hanging out with all the people in the band, we just weren't doing any music. They were still my closest friends though, so it was like "Let's do some recording."

Twenty-five years after you started though, it's kind of staggering to me that it can still be interesting and exciting. How is it?

Sally: Well it isn't always. That would be

asking a lot. When you do your magazine you probably have days where you think "Fuck this I can't be bothered to do it" or "I have nothing to write about." I think the process is more interesting than the end result. There's no doubt that we've put out records that I think are really weak, but for some reason there's always *something* in them that I think is valuable. ¶ It's weird to say it, but it is a kind of community now. We get together to do these things. We've done tours where we have a great time, and we've done tours where we've hated each other's guts and it's been a nightmare.

John: You can't really predict when that's going to happen, either.

Sally: There's a few times where I've thought "Sod this, I don't want to ever do it again." But then I think "Why stop?"



It's not like we're trying to sell lots of records. I think if no one was interested we would still do it anyway. It's almost perverse!

John: There have been points where no one was interested and we kept doing it because it would annoy people. [laughs] In the early '80s in England, me, Kevin, and Tom just got together to make a record to piss people off. It was our revenge. *The Mekons Story* was purely our revenge on people who said we shouldn't make any more records. I love that record, I think it's great, but it was only done as a weird, perverse "fuck you." Everyone hated us *so much*. We had made loads of mistakes and we had done a lot of pretty crap things. I can't listen to some of the early Mekons records.

Sally: But it doesn't matter. People perceive this stuff as something that *has* to be meaningful to a great number of people. I

think that's really problematic. I don't think we ever wanted to do that. ¶ I think punk is like folk music—there is a functional nature to them both. You can go and play a gig and actually entertain just those few people who have come to see it. It doesn't have to extend beyond that. It doesn't have to be about being famous—in fact it is the opposite, a *rejection* of that. The idea that you can produce music in your living room, which is what people used to do. I like that side of it, that it's just functional and literally for just the people who happen to hear it. If it's three people or 300, it doesn't matter.

John: I never found anything I wanted to do more than that. The only time this band doesn't work for me is when I've had to do it full time and when it's become where I earn my money. Then it's like "This is really odd that I'm earning my money by basically exercising my *total* rites of freedom." In the Mekons I can do whatever I want to do and the Mekons can be whatever we want it to be. It doesn't have to be about anyone else's structures of commerce or things like that. We don't even have to put out records—we can do art shows or do a book. The fact that we all actually love records is why we've made records so much.

Sally: It's kind of weird because I've only recently started thinking about what it all means because it is the 25th anniversary of the band. I haven't even been in the band that long, I've only been in it 15 years . . .

John: No, you joined in 1982.

Sally: 1982? So I've *only* been in it 20 years. [laughs] It is like a bizarre philosophy . . .

John: It's not even bizarre to me. It's a philosophy that makes complete sense.

What would you define that philosophy as?

John: That you can make music for reasons other than to try and become famous and make money. It's not a very radical idea. It's not radical in any century other than this one and halfway through the last one. Before that, a musician wasn't necessarily a foot soldier in the arsenal of big corporations. We're still trying to do that now. Sometimes it's fucking nearly *impossible* to do

that. I know we're not pure and clean and outside the capitalist system, but every time we've ventured closer to the center, we've gotten burned. It's a hard lesson to learn because you think, "Well there *must* be a way of making this work." There are some good people that are on major labels and have no qualms about it and have had good careers, but it doesn't work for us because we don't know what we're going to do next. We're not selling the product of one person's talent or one person's songwriting or one person's good looks or something like that. We're selling . . .

Sally: . . . a load of ugly people who are old. [laughs]

John: I think we're a pretty sexy band, actually. [laughs] I fancy everyone in the band but I haven't slept with anyone. Sally doesn't fancy anyone in the band but she's slept with all of them. [laughs] Except Rico and Steve.

Sally: *Thank you* for that. *Please* make that really clear. [laughs]

Looking at the band, the lesson of being burned does appear to be one that it took a while to learn. You signed to majors twice, and you got fucked twice.

John: Three times, actually. We signed to WEA after A&M.

Sally: Very briefly and quite bizarrely.

John: It wasn't brief. We were apparently signed to them for a very long time. [laughs]

Sally: We weren't even ever signed to them, I don't think.

John: We were in negotiations with them for about 18 months. It was one of the worst periods of my life.

What made that lesson have to be learned three times?

John: Frustration. I think what we we're doing is really good, it's really interesting—so then why are we *fucking* starving to death?

Sally: Three times over 25 years, that makes it every seven years for some reason we need to sign to a major. Maybe we forget.

John: The times we signed it was out of frustration with what the independents

could offer. Major labels tend to be large and incompetent and screw you up by suffocating you in their bureaucracy and their befuddling. Independent labels are usually run by one criminal who basically wants to rip you off. I can't apply that to Chicago though, because we've been very lucky here. We've both been involved with two independent labels here who have been fairly honest and open in their dealings with us.

Those labels would be Touch & Go and Bloodshot?

Sally: Yeah. I would also have to say looking at Chicago labels like Thrill Jockey and Drag City, they're pretty fair too. That's pretty unusual.

John: It's almost like there's some sort of social sanctioning in Chicago where the norm is to be fairly honest and straight with people. If somebody here was running a business where they were acting like the independents did in England in the late '70s—or even now—I don't think they'd be the survivor in Chicago. Word would get around. I think the standards here are higher for honesty and enthusiasm about the process of making music. ¶ We heard good reports of Touch & Go. I knew Gibby [Haynes of the Butthole Surfers] always said, "Touch & Go are the only honest label on the planet." Which is probably why he sued them. [laughs] ¶ It's almost like the independent music industry has come of age here and it has realized its position. It is sidelined to its own benefit. All the Nirvana crap went on and everyone was signing every band that ever existed. A lot of bands also got signed, strangely enough, because of the alternative country thing. I think a lot of the devastation that happened after both those things only made Touch & Go and Bloodshot stronger. They said "OK, that's pop music over *there* and this is what we do over *here*."

Sally: That's how it used to be. There was a phase where independents did fulfill a need and were able to sell records. Unfortunately, the outlets for radio disappeared. It seems like it is shrinking back to an understanding that certain music is marginal, but that doesn't mean that it's not able to be sold or heard. It doesn't have to be gathered up into the majors

and lost. Which was kind of how things were going. It was getting really homogenized and people were thinking about giving up because they didn't know if they had outlets for their music. I wonder if we're seeing a swing back to a time when you'll hear more variety.

John: Take something like this *O Brother Where Art Thou* album. It's interesting because that's a massive seller but there's still nowhere for it on radio. It's vaguely worrying on one level—as someone who's a fan of that kind of music seeing it in the jingle houses and people trying to do "*O Brother*" music—but at the same time realizing that people are open to something like that and they like it.

Sally: And it's not N'Sync.

John: You know what? I have no bone to pick with manufactured pop whatsoever. I

think it's great that that kind of stuff is going on and it's so clear—it's not even dressed up. To me, something like U2 is much more insidious, 'cause that's manufactured crap pop music . . .

Sally: Here we go. [laughs]

John: . . . it's pretending to be something else and it's pretending to have some sort of social values although it doesn't recognize its own hypocrisy. It pretends it's outside the system it's attacking.

Sally: Why don't you say "he"? It's Bono that you hate!

John: Well yeah. But there are a lot of bands that dress themselves up in the second-hand clothes of radical rock. But they're really just major corporate entities acting like N'Sync. In a way, something like N'Sync or Britney Spears is much more honest. And actually make better music! [laughs]

There's also a long tradition of manufactured pop bands.

Sally: There is, but pop music used to be Motown and now it's Jive records!

I'm sorry, there isn't a comparison. It's a little bit of a shame. I just think they've got it down now, how they can market everything at once and it almost eradicates everything else. I'm just hoping that whenever things get too large, they eventually crumble.

John: It's like the last 10 years of country music in Nashville. It's crumbling now. All the sales are down, the radio ratings are down, because they've been so greedy and complacent and have been turning out shit. They've been so exclusive and not allowing anyone else in.

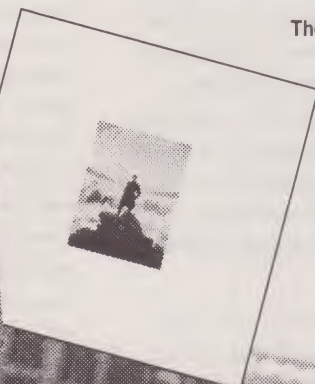
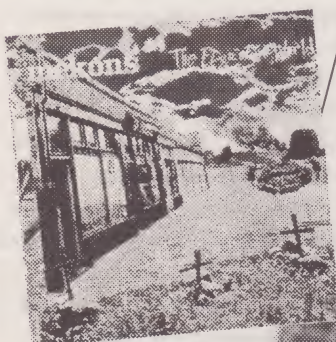
Sally: People's tolerance for shit, I hope, does have a limit.

John: I don't think I'm being an old fuddy duddy when you say look at *Top of the Pops* in England in about 1973, it was pretty fucking great music. You had Mott the Hoople, Elton John, the Stylistics, a load of great black solo acts, Roxy Music, Slade, T-Rex, David Bowie . . . That was the commercial peak and there were a lot of weird things going on in that. I was a 15-year-old and was probably quite smart. All the thick football hooligans that were my mates, they were into David Bowie and Slade and stuff like that. They were into David Bowie's *Station to Station*, one of the most challenging albums of the '70s. Guys with Bay City Rollers pants on and feather cuts were into that! There's no real comparison to that now, with stuff like Creed and Limp Bizkit . . .

Sally: . . . they're not pushing the musical boundaries. And I think that bands, even in the pop facility, used to do that. There are some things you hear and you think "Wow, I'm amazed they got away with that."

John: The first time I heard "Virginia Plain" by Roxy Music, I couldn't fucking understand what it was. I had to go and listen to it 20 times before I could discern what was even going on in it, it was so weird and so odd.

I think a lot of the reason why we don't have that now in mainstream pop is because the music industry has accelerated its rate of return. They've gone from giving a band a couple albums to giving a band *one song*. If you don't break it on that one song, you're gone. And while there have *always* been one-hit-



THE ORIGINAL IDEA OF THE MEKONS WAS THAT WE WERE A BAND THAT COULDN'T PLAY, BUT THE IDEAS WOULD BE STRONG ENOUGH THAT YOU COULD SUSTAIN IT WITHOUT BEING TECHNICALLY PROFICIENT.

wonder bands, it seems like bands used to be given time to gestate and to become something more. I mean what would have happened had David Bowie been only allowed . . .

John: . . . "The Laughing Gnome". [laughs]

Sally: Essentially, if you look back in the '70s and '80s—and I'm sure it still goes on—you did have a bunch of people working in the music industry who were very similar to the bands. They were more into the music than being industry. They were very into taking a lot of drugs and fucking around and doing all those things. But I think that the whole thing—the idea of the music industry being an industry—was different. It was more music-oriented. Now it truly is about units. They're owned by Seagrams—what do you expect? Synergy has killed off those independent functioning units and now it's all about money.

John: In Chicago, a lot of the people running the labels and running the clubs are not under the thumb of the industry. The industry is far away—it's on the West Coast and the East Coast. That makes Chicago interesting because you can have club owners who would never dream of making people pay to play or dream of making their club into a showcase for major labels. In New York and LA, that's the norm.

Sally: It's the same in London—people pay to play because there are so many bands. People get treated like shit.

John: It was actually like that in London a long time ago too. We played the Rock Garden and we'd get tickets and anyone that came in with your ticket, you'd get money. But basically you'd end up with no money.

With such a wide-angle view of the industry, what makes you say "Well, let's continue to contribute to this, even in our own small way." You've obviously gotten enough from it that it makes you want to continue to contribute to the lineage of music in general. It seems like there must be times where you say "Fuck this, this is *all* so corrupt, this is *all* so awful."

Sally: There have been moments where we've been pretty depressed about stuff because it hasn't gone our way, but it doesn't ever come to a point where we go, "Oh god, maybe we should stop making

music." That really doesn't seem to be the way that we function at all. ¶ This is a hard point to make because I wouldn't say it applies to everyone in the band, but I would say we're enthusiasts about life. I don't think any of us subscribe to that ultra politically-correct ideology that you can't do anything because you're tainted. Life is *about* contradiction. You accept that if you make music, there are contradictions inherent in it, but it doesn't mean that you don't do it.

John: There are responsibilities as well. We signed to a major label with A&M and our first thought was "let's make an album about the industry." *Rock and Roll* was about that. We're not very good at being direct, we all cringe away from too much chest beating, 'cause we're aware of the contradictions.

Our discussion has been a lot about the band itself and the music industry as a whole, but to me another thing about the Mekons that really stands out is the band's dedication to explore and expand musical boundaries. Whether that manifests itself in a more electronic aspect like the *Me* album, or a continuing dedication to country with *Fear and Whiskey* and some of your solo work . . . where does the aspect of experimentation fit into it all?

John: I think that's the core of it. The idea that we can do what we want to do and there's no rules to the type of music we should make. A lot of bands try and get something right and try and get their sound down and make it perfect and make it as accessible as possible. I think we're a little more challenging than that. And that's a compliment to our audience. Not that many people like us, but the ones that do like us because sometimes it's a bit surprising what you're going to get. ¶ We don't consciously think "We should do an album like *this*" or "We should do an album that sounds totally like *that*." It's about ways of working and ways of working together. It's not about me and Tom saying "This album should be about this and this is how we should do it." We get bored easily. [laughs] When you do something once and it works really well, it's usually the act of finding it and discovering it that makes it interesting and then when you try and

repeat it, it doesn't work so good. It's almost like you have to change the ground rules every time. You can't just go in and do the same album again.

That same philosophy applies even now? Now you do all know how to play your instruments . . .

Sally: I'd say that's still debatable. [laughs]

In a way it seems like the Mekons is a very big and very public learning process.

John: I don't think we feel any obligation to conceal our process.

It seems like a lot of bands are sort of afraid to acknowledge process or acknowledge their stylistic influences. They want everyone to think that they operated in a vacuum and this is true, unadulterated art that came out of nowhere. And of course, that's bullshit.

John: I think for us it was always about recognizing that. When we started as a punk band, we didn't think we sounded like any other band. We did the second album, which was pretty off the wall—the album that Sally used to play and roll around on the floor laughing—and there were loads of influences in there. ¶ Someone once said that what was interesting about the Mekons was the bits in between the notes. It wasn't about whether the notes were right, it was like the mistakes were more interesting than what was intentional. It was like we were falling into a tradition of a lot of folk music where mistakes became part of the style and the limitations of the instruments and the limitations of the playing became a part of the sound. ¶ A mate from Chicago named Terry Nelson came over to London in the early '80s and he thought we were like a country band. He said "All your songs are about being in bars." It's true. Our songs weren't these chest-beating, punk anger, smash-the-system type songs. We thought that stuff was pretty funny. Our songs were more descriptive and more personal, but the personal is political.

Sally: I've been thinking about why there's almost an element that's a little clownish in the way we present ourselves. I was listening to *Entertainment* by the Gang of Four and I was thinking about them

because I knew them and I thought about what I used to think of them when I saw them play. How incredibly *serious* they were on stage when they played. I thought "How come when we played, they couldn't take us seriously?" And I think it's because if we ever presented the songs that we did in a more serious way, it would seem *really* grim. The Gang of Four and all those bands, everything is slightly detached—none of their songs are personal, whereas we tend to sing more about things that happen to you. If we really sang those in a serious manner, it would be so *dismal* that you would never really want to listen. It's like a conversation with someone in a bar—you say things that are very serious but then you might make a joke about them because you have to balance it out.

John: We just try to debunk the whole seriousness of it all. There was a lot of posturing in punk rock. Even some of my favorite bands did that, like the Clash and the Gang of Four. We always felt like we needed to debunk the idea of the band being on stage. One way of saying we're no better than you are was to be slightly clownish and act like idiots. Sometimes we acted like idiots because we were out of our minds . . .

Sally: . . . or because we actually *are* idiots. [laughs]

John: Well *yeah*, there's that as well. On our first American tour we went on, it was just ridiculous. It was 1986 and we were touring the states and there was *no* possibility that it was going anywhere whatsoever, so we figured we should just have a good time. I've listened to recordings of that tour and the music that we're playing is pretty barbaric. A lot of the talking doesn't make any sense whatsoever. But it was quite funny to us at the time. I think everything we've ever done, up until when we started working with Touch & Go, we always thought everything we were doing was the last thing, so it never really mattered.

Implicit in that statement is that there's a certain recognition that now it *does* matter. That now, 25 years later, you're pretty much assured that the next record you put out won't be your last record unless you want it to be your last record.

John: That definitely has changed. Which is a blessing and a curse.

In what way?

John: I think it's nice being somewhere safe where people look after you and are nice to you, but I also think it was quite interesting being in really hostile situations and still have to produce stuff. I wouldn't want to do that again, but sometimes I think some of the good things that came out on records was a result of the turmoil and complete lack of interest. *The Mekons Story* or even *Fear and Whiskey*—those records were made with the ghosts of all different types of music, but were made in something of a contemporary vacuum. We didn't have an audience so we were making the records for ourselves. We weren't even sure that *Fear and Whiskey* was going to come out. But now, we *do* have an audience. We put a record out and it sells a certain amount. It never really sells more than that amount, but it doesn't sell less than it either. But it means we can continue doing it.

LIFE IS *ABOUT* CONTRADICTION. YOU ACCEPT THAT IF YOU MAKE MUSIC, THERE ARE CONTRADICTIONS INHERENT IN IT, BUT IT DOESN'T MEAN THAT YOU DON'T DO IT.

Sally: But we'd continue to do it anyway, we'd just have to change the way we do it. Which wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing. I think we've gotten to the point where we realize that we've done things a bit of the same way for a while and now it's time to tear it up a bit and do it differently. Sometimes having to be resourceful produces interesting results. For a while, we've known that we can fly people over and we can do what we do in the town that we live in, but for me personally—and I think that everyone else feels this way too—it's time to try something completely different. Because you do get interesting results from making due with what you have.

Do you ever see the Mekons stopping?

John: Death.

Sally: I really don't think I do see it stopping. Why stop it? It doesn't mean that we have to make a record every two years. It

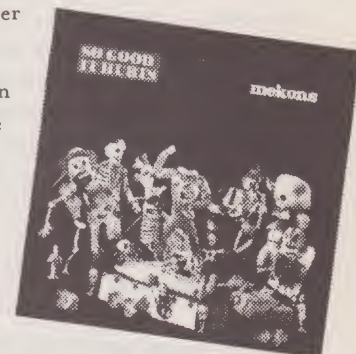
may be that we go 10 years without making a record. But I don't see why I wouldn't carry on singing with the Mekons when I'm 60 years old. It's not about rock music, so I don't feel constrained by age—it is rock music, but not with whatever youthful requirements.

John: It feels really interesting the longer it goes. There's no model for a band like us. There's absolutely no stereotype that we have to fit in with. We can really make it up and if we don't feel like doing it, then we won't do it.

Sally: But I don't think that anyone would say "We are never going to walk into a room and make a record together any longer."

John: Certain people in the band, if they said that, then we wouldn't.

Sally: But



they've said it before! People have gone, but they come back. It's always been that way.

John: It depends who it is and for what reasons they wouldn't want to do it. Some people drift off because they've got other things to do and that's fine—it's like an open door policy.

Sally: I think if Tom and John, if neither of them were involved then it wouldn't happen. But aside from them, I don't think it's reliant on the other members to have to be there. They're like the elders.

John: What's never happened is to get some younger people in the band. We could be like a basketball team—we could become the coaches for the younger players. But that's just never worked out. Maybe there will be a big shift in a few years time. It could be kind of nice if it could continue on after our deaths. ©

Chic-a-go-go is one the greatest benefits to living in Chicago. A weekly public access TV dance show "for children of all ages" that looks like a no-budget *Soul Train*, with a teenage, straight-edge skinhead rat puppet named Ratso as Don Cornelius, posed against a cardboard skyline of downtown.

For the last six years, *Chic-a-go-go* has built a solid following and served as a dream come true for those who love to dance and act a fool. On your average episode (there have been more than 250) you can spot Girl Scout troops shimmying alongside art school weirdos in roller-skates and helmets, mods prancing with parents, while a dude that looks like the janitor from your junior high breaks a sweat in the corner.

What began as an hour of fun from *Roctober* fanzine editor Jake Austin and partner Jacqueline Stewart has grown into not only becoming a much-beloved staple in the Chicago DIY music community, but also dance fantasy time for local kids.

Interview by **Jessica Hopper**

Photos by **Michael Coleman**

How did you get started doing the show?

Jake: I had been working on a piece for *Roctober* about a children's show from the '60s called *Kiddie-a-Go-Go*, which was a dance show on local commercial TV. It was kind of like American bandstand with kids. We went out to lunch with the couple that did the show and they were talking about how fun it was. They did the show live, so if things didn't happen, if jokes fell flat, it was OK. We were *really* into that idea. Part of the appeal was that it was very DIY—but doing a show that isn't perfect, that's almost live. It also was very fun-looking and relatively easy.

Jackie: So for three weekends we went and took a class at cable access and learned how to work everything in the studio. Then you volunteer and work on some other shows and then you propose your own show.

Jake: The only restriction for shows is that there is no commercial content—no advertising anything. You can use profanity, but not obscenity. Nudity—near pornography—seems to be OK on some

shows. There are quite a few shows on access with strippers.

Give me a little timeline of things.

Jackie: We got trained in February '96. We already had a lot of ideas in place . . .

Jake: . . . and a few that didn't make it. We originally wanted to have a giant puppet cop that went around and hit people who weren't dancing with his nightstick. We were trying to come up with a lot of distinctly Chicago things, and we thought a puppet cop would be ideal. But other than that almost everything else we thought of, we did. The first episode looks amazing—we spent *so much* time on it. The shows after that kind of went downhill. [laughs] It took us three hours to just do one half-hour episode when we started. Now we do two shows and an

There is no genre for music that kids won't dance to. ¶ Once we establish that everyone at the show is safe, they can be open to whatever is going to happen, people will let their guard down, and dance to every song and pay attention to the bands—whether they are country or punk doesn't matter. The atmosphere helps that happen.

Talk about some of the key things you want to get across and get out of it.

Jackie: To celebrate Chicago music and Chicago music history. We have worked really hard to get a lot of different acts from the '50s and '60s on as well as local bands. Old acts come on and lip sync their doo-wop hits. In some ways we just want to document the rich history of music that Chicago has, which is very

There is no genre of music that kids won't dance to.

extra 15 minutes of dancing in the same period of time. There are a lot of kids there and they can't hang around and dance that long, they get tired. ¶ What's important to us aside from that the few thousand people watching should have fun, is that the space of *Chic-a-Go-Go*, is that it is going to be safe and fun. Parents need to be secure in that the kids are not going to be exposed to anything too weird. We really are concerned with the welfare of children there and the children watching. When picking the music, we don't do anything explicit and sexual. I think any other type of music is safe for kids—political, whatever. There's other dance shows on access where they play a lot of contemporary R&B and pop that I wouldn't play on our show—it's too risqué for *Chic-a-Go-Go*. I don't want to see a six-year-old dancing to those songs.

important. And what Jake said—having people who would not normally associate with each other, dancing together on our show. It's been really incredible to see who comes together on our shows.

Jake: This month was really interesting—that whole troop of Indian Princesses and their dads from the suburbs. Last month there were all these inner city kids brought in by their B'hai youth group.

Jackie: And all those dads by the end loosened up and were dancing. They all wrote us e-mail saying they had a terrific time.

Jake: I love the idea of cable access. It costs \$55 a year. Otherwise, we don't lose any money. What we get out of it is that we get to make non-commercial media. We don't have to worry about selling ads, or fitting a demographic and be market-based or worry about what you can and

CHIC-A-



GO - GO



Ratso hangs out at the Museum of Science & Industry.

cannot do. You get to do something that's *such* a rich experience. I have never had anyone tell me that they have a fun time working on network TV, and with *Chic-a-Go-Go*, it's always a fun, free experience. We are really proud of the finished product and happy to create the community that we create. ¶ We get so many letters from people that love the show. There is a couple that has brought their baby since she was a year old—now she is seven. They are normal people, with normal jobs, they don't get to go out much, but *Chic-a-Go-Go* is like when they get to go out and have fun. They have a second child who has also grown up on *Chic-a-Go-Go* and it means a lot to us. It's some thing that anyone can enjoy, and that's terrific. ¶ Plus we are creating a body of work; we can look back on six years of episodes. Documenting some of these older acts—if they ever did TV it was so long ago that there's no document of—it's important to document that for them. For the small local bands we work with, this might be the best documentation that they existed because we do a five-camera shoot. A lot of the popular bands that are on the show like to be interviewed by a puppet and like to have kids around them because it's so surreal.

Have Miss Mia and Ratso always hosted the show?

Jackie: We have had three human hosts, Miss Mia being the longest, but Ratso has always been the co-host. Miss Mia has really taken the show to another level, in the way that she is so connected to the bands. She also really gets what the show is about, and she is so infectious, her energy really helps make the show.

Jake: Plus, when bands come on, if anyone has an unusual instrument or whatever, she has them demonstrate it for the kids. When we had a musical saw, the children's eyes just got as big as saucers! She had the person play it again, so all the kids could see and ask questions. You know, on *Bozo*, they never let the kids ask questions.

I noticed that she really tries to connect with the kids watching—always asking the bands

if they have a message for the kids at home, or directing things to Ratso about the kids.

Jackie: That's the *Chic-a-Go-Go* question—we always ask for a message to the kids at home. Even the bands that are wacky or super cool and serious with Ratso—when we get to that question they get *really* serious and reflective.

Jake: Marky Ramone got super serious and it became very clear that he really cares about kids in his answers. Lots of people tell kids to stay in school and listen to their parents. A lot of them will talk about why music is important to them. Andrew WK totally got into talking to Ratso—his message was one of general positivity. It's really wonderful when you can tell that people really care about the kids watching. Jello Biafra—of course he starts rattling things off—he started his message off and immediately started amending it: "Question Authority . . . No no, Question *Everything!*" and then just started pounding it from there.

What are your most memorable *Chic-a-Go-Go* moments? Has there ever been any time where you didn't want to do it?

Jake: There have been some times where bands have come on inappropriately dressed or had a song about doing drugs and it was really overt, where we have had to do something about it. One time there was a dancer who was naked except for some tape. One of the bands playing that night had brought all these bags of balloons, so I held a bag of balloons on either side of the guys and walked him out. There were 30 kids out there, so that wasn't going to fly.

Jackie: Some days there are a lot of problems because access is kind of low budget and gets a lot of use and things can break and we can have tech problems. But it's pretty rare.

Jake: It can be frustrating, but that's about it.

Jackie: One of my favorite things we ever did, we had on a jump roping woman called "The Hip Hopper" and she did a dance routine with a jump rope, incorpo-

rating aerobics and stunts. She would jump rope and do the splits.

Jake: She would jump rope on her butt, and kind of rap while she did it. Mia had heard about her and this woman had an exercise video called like, *Jumping Rope Round the World*. She was so talented! Everyone felt really intense joy watching her on the show. ¶ A few months ago we had Rudy Ray Moore on the show as a guest. He's famous for doing really pornographic songs. He got offended when I asked him if he would be able to come on and work clean. He goes, "I have performed in hospitals for sick people, I have performed in old age homes—I CAN WORK CLEAN!" So he came on—every band is only supposed to do one song, but for each 20 years in show biz, you get another song—he got about eight minutes. He came out and lip-synchs one of the songs he did in the '50s—clean R&B. Then Miss Mia interviews him and he does a joke, a clean joke, about a monkey on a bus that everyone loved. He told me to start this beat he had after the joke. And all the sudden he looks in the camera and starts doing a toast, which is what he's really famous for—but a clean one—and it's like he's in a trance, he's just saying this intense poem. And then he leans down, and starts talking to these two-year-olds, these dancers, and says "One day your parents are going to tell you that you met Dolemite," and then did another song. It was just *fantastic*. ¶ We had on a blues singer called the Black Lone Ranger, who was really serious, he'd ride the bus in his outfit. Kids recognized him a lot more after doing the show, and that was nice for him because he was a really obscure blues artist.

How did you populate the show when you first start shooting?

Jackie: Friends told friends, friends brought their kids . . . My mom has been on the show dancing; Jake's grandma has been on. We have a lot of regulars, Soul Rebel for one.

His dancing is really from another world. Very aerobic, very free, yet it's clearly visceral.

Jake: One time on Channel 9 news, they put *Chic-a-Go-Go* on—to make fun of us. They did a blue screen so it looked like they were dancing on the show—on the WGN morning news show! They made fun of Soul Rebel and because of that some people made fun of him on the train, and he got kind of sad. But he's also told me stories that kids recognize him from the show and love him and tell him his dancing is the best.

How many people do you think watch the show?

Jackie: We just have to go by hearing things on the street, or how much Mia gets recognized.

Jake: We do a live call in show once a year and that's kind of how we gauge it. The phone lines are *jammed* the entire time. It can be nothing but children, sometimes, child after child saying "Hi" to Ratso. Sometimes guys will call in and try to ask Mia out, which is really funny.

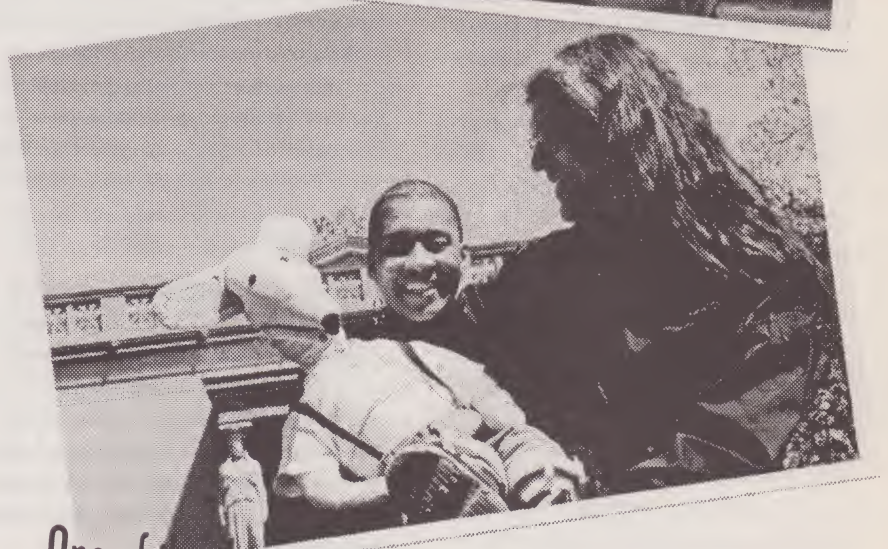
Jackie: Kids *love* Ratso, they crowd him when he's out.

Jake: They will see me working Ratso underneath, and just forget about me, and just ask Ratso questions—ask him to bite their hands, touch him.

Jackie: Ratso is a kid like them, so . . .

How old is Ratso?

Jake: He's about 14. His brother, little Ratso, is seven. Ratina is 17—she's finding herself. She doesn't have it all together but she's thinking about stuff. Roby, who does Ratina, says she's trying to figure out if Ratina is a lesbian or not. She's not sure, and that's kind of like, her motivation. She was invented for Ladyfest last year, and she was interviewing all the bands, and she was *really* admiring them. Actually one of the things we had to edit out was during an interview with Kathleen Hanna, Ratina asks for a hug and Kathleen just totally started humping the puppet! We had to have Kathleen re-do it and just give Ratina a "nice hug." That would go on our bloopers reel, if we had one—
"Puppets Gone Wild!" ©



One of the things we had to edit out was during an interview with Kathleen Hanna, Ratina asks for a hug and Kathleen just totally started humping the puppet!

We punks are generally a cynical bunch. We like to complain about what's wrong in our town, our state, and our country, but virtually none of us believe in the political system. Sure there are a lot of us that are activists and even more of us that write about politics in songs or in zines, but when was the last time you heard a punk talk about *voting* the wrongs away? Punk is one of the few places where talk of vote boycotts is taken seriously and where singing about a political problem is viewed as a better move than dealing with it in the voting booth.

Which is why my curiosity was piqued when I got an e-mail in April from Jason Farbman. "I'm up in Roger's Park running as a Green for State Representative of the 14th District," his letter began. I figured it was a note from a lefty reader, not so much a punk rocker—someone who likes the politics of the zine, but doesn't really read the music stuff we cover. But by the time I got to Farbman's concluding sentence—"There's a Dillinger Four show at the Empty bottle tonight, so I'll end this here"—I was sold. This was a guy I wanted to talk to.

Perhaps I should take a moment to explain Illinois politics to those of you reading from outside of the state: it's about as corrupt as it can get. The mayor of Chicago is the son of the man who held the job for 21 years. Our governor has been plagued by an ongoing investigation looking into whether he *sold* commercial drivers licenses in exchange for campaign contributions. At the state representative level—the office that Farbman is running for—both the Democratic and Republican parties dole out millions of dollars based almost entirely on a complex system of political back-scratching, paranoia, and good old-fashioned pork. It's not the kind of place for starry-eyed idealists.

On first glance, Farbman certainly seems the starry-eyed part—running an uphill campaign against an entrenched machine politi-

cian with little knowledge of how to do it (or much knowledge of the city either—he only moved here a few years ago). But the longer I talk with him, the more I come around to believing that he can pull it off. Why? Because Farbman keeps one foot in politics and the other foot in punk.

"I really want to run a DIY campaign," he explains as we walk around his district. "I see so much waste. I think this can be done efficiently, like promoting a show. Why spend so much on printing up leaflets when I know how to spend virtually nothing making flyers for punk shows?"

It's that kind of thinking that might just land Farbman in Springfield next fall.

Interview and photo by **Daniel Sinker**

How did you get involved in running for state representative?

I had been involved in politics out in Connecticut and I wanted to get involved in politics in Illinois when I moved here. I contacted the Illinois Green Party's website looking to do some shitwork for them—precinct work or petitioning or whatever—but they were looking for candidates. It was November of 2001 at that point, so there was still a ways to go before the 2002 elections. So I contacted them and they got right back to me and asked me to run.

I've been to that website and seen the call for candidates, and I've just giggled and said, "Um, no." [laughs] There had to be something more going on in your head than "Oh, I was going to file papers or answer phones, but they're looking for candidates so I guess I'll be a candidate." What was it that made you go, "Sure, that work, that effort is something that I want to do."

I played in a band for five years, and when we broke up there was nothing. Then I did a label—four releases and stopped doing it. I was looking for something to do. There

are a lot of people that do magazines really well, other people that do bands really well, and I don't see where I can contribute to those

fields and do anything well or have a unique voice. They were looking for candidates, and I talk politics all day, I read politics on the web and in magazines, so it seemed like an obvious extension. And since there was nobody running, I might as well do it myself. and It takes something of an ego to run, and I don't think I had that until they finally endorsed me. I had to cultivate it through getting convinced to run and then arguing for an endorsement.

So the process wasn't as simple as "Sure I'll do it" and then they go "You're our guy!" You had to prove to them that you were worthy of endorsement. Walk me through that process.

Daniel at the Illinois Green Party really wants a lot of political candidates, so he was *really* supportive. The people at the actual locals though—I went to a few meetings and then announced that I wanted to run—they were immediately suspicious because they don't know me and didn't know what I was about. I was trying to come to them and say "I want to run, I want to work *every day* for the next 10 months running up and down talking about progressive politics and getting people involved in the Green Party." It was a 10 week process of going back and forth trying to get the endorsement. Finally, they endorsed me unanimously.

What are the major points of your platform?

Affordable housing. Gentrification is a really big problem here. It's a problem in a lot of places—that's why I moved away from New York and Connecticut—but I hadn't realized how bad it was in Chicago.



"WHO REPRESENTS

JASON FARBMAN

Housing is really important. There's a huge deal going down in Edgewater where they're giving a seven million dollar subsidy to build a Borders and \$400,000 condos in this totally depressed area. Things like that are happening all over the city. It's a *huge* issue. ¶ It's not a real sexy issue, but electoral reform and campaign finance reform is a *must*. We want to get proportional representation with instant runoff voting established. With the Democrats having such a monopoly on politics in Chicago, it's so important. ¶ We want to make sure that the moratorium on the death penalty gets turned into a ban. All the candidates for governor are for the death penalty. I'd like to make sure that there's a presence in Springfield that wants to abolish it. ¶ Another issue is a living wage and universal healthcare and making the economy work for working people. All of the money shouldn't be going to heads of the corporations—people should be getting higher wages and guaranteed healthcare. Illinois got an F from the AFL-CIO for their unemployment benefits. Things like that are being ignored. Working people are being ignored in Chicago. ¶

Another issue is environmentally sound legislation. Between the airport and Lake Michigan, the environment has an effect on the city. It's not a "Saves the Whales" issue where people don't have to care about it. The environment affects them. Their children might be eating irradiated food; that truck in front of them might be carrying nuclear waste.

So you got the endorsement from the party how long ago?

I was endorsed in the beginning of April.

And the election is in November. How do the next six months of your life play out? If you've only been an endorsed candidate for a month, I assume the real on-the-street running has only been happening for a month.

There's so much more to a campaign than the on-the-street stuff. You don't even hit the street until July at the earliest. It's like a punk show—if you announce it two months in advance, people are going to forget by the time it rolls around. I'm going to be going door-to-door from July on because I *have* to. But Democrats and Republicans only really campaign in September and

October. ¶ I've had to learn *everything* from scratch, because there's no Green infrastructure in Illinois at all. We have to get petitions signed first of all—we need at least 1,500 signatures on it, but we're going to get 3,000 because they nit-pick over everything. If the "i" isn't dotted, they'll try and throw it out. We had to learn how to get petitions, what the petition had to look like, how to form a committee. Every little detail I had to learn by calling three different people at the state board of elections or going down into the loop and sent to the wrong buildings. It's really been difficult. There have been a lot of false starts.

Is it what you've expected so far?

Yes and no. It's been a lot more solitary than I expected. I do go to a lot of meetings, but I expected to be in meetings *constantly*. For all the fuss the Green Party made about me including them in the dialogue, every time I send an e-mail out saying "I have this interview, does anyone want me to talk about anything?" I get no response. It works better if I make a decision, announce it, and if anyone has a problem with it, we talk about it. ¶ The

YOU?"

Jason Farban warming up at Lake Michigan.



enormity of running, especially in Chicago against the machine is really daunting. I didn't expect all the stuff that I had read about politics in books about the history of Chicago to *still* be true today.

You might have thought that all this bullshit in Chicago is just Chicago local politics, but Illinois state politics is just as corrupt and just as fucked up—if not more so.

Absolutely. It's got more money and is broader influenced. The guy that I'm running against has *never* had a private job—he's been in public office all his life. He was from the Streets and Sanitation department and he parried that into a huge force to move him into state office. He ran as an incumbent last election but only because they put him into office when the woman who had the job, Carol Ronan, moved to state senate. He didn't really earn it, but he became an incumbent which gives him an advantage over everyone else. Things like that happen *everywhere* in Illinois and that was very startling.

Realistically, what kind of chance do you think you have?

I'm optimistic. There are a few ways of figuring out how many votes you approximately need to win and we figure we need a little under 12,000. It depends on how well we use everything and how many people get involved. If you go door-to-door and talk face-to-face, that's so much more valuable than getting a flyer in the mail with some promises on it. If we get *good* localization going on, I think we can win. I don't think he's going to take us that seriously and there's no Republican candidate, so we don't have to get involved with spoiler issues. We just have to talk about where the Democrats are falling short. They're not talking about *any* of the issues we're talking about, they're just giv-

ing the Bears \$400 million dollars while they're closing hospitals down and boasting about fighting terrorism. But if they were really serious about terrorism, they would keep the hospitals open in case of an Anthrax scare. ¶ I think there are a number of ways to win this election even if we *don't* get those 12,000 votes though. If we get five percent—I can't conceive that we'll get *less* than five percent—that establishes the party in this district, which means we don't have to petition next time, we just cruise right in with whomever wants to run. If I get 25 percent of the election, which I think is likely, we've doubled the output of any Republican candidate in the last 10 years.

How much do you have to battle the obvious "I only vote for Democrats" factor in this city?

It's hard to deal with. My upstairs neighbor wouldn't sign my petition because she only votes Democratic. I tried to explain to her that it wasn't an endorsement, it was just to get on the ballot, but she said "I only vote Democrat" and closed the door. A lot of people say that and a lot of people accuse us of costing Gore the election. But it's counterproductive to get into argument with Democrats. ¶ One of our campaign themes is "Who represents you?" This guy who has made nothing less than \$85,000 his entire career? Does he really represent the \$20,000 a year working class? You may not agree that I do either, but who's closer?

So let's say you are elected. You go down to Springfield and you're going to have to compromise your ass off in order to stay alive. It's one thing to talk about these ideals and it's another thing to enact them and all of the bullshit that goes along with that. How much does that worry you?

I have to recognize my limitations. If I'm

the only one elected, at least I have a forum. I can get on the senate floor and embarrass the more progressive Democrats into *hopefully* blocking specific parts of legislation. For instance, there's something on the floor right now that allows corporations to decide on their own labeling for irradiated food. They're trying to use "pasteurization" instead of saying that something has been irradiated. Things like that, I can call out and say "This is ridiculous, this *specific* thing needs to go and fight for that. If I can get *two* bills passed in the two years I'm there, that's probably going to be a ton. It's more that I can speak out. I got elected to talk about these things, so let's talk about them. If I go into the house as a Green, I want to talk to Republicans and Democrats immediately and say "This is what I'm all about, can we do this? I'd love to work together with you." But if that doesn't look like it's likely, I still don't have anything to lose by going down there and screaming about what the people elected me for. ¶ I don't have anything to lose by running. By running, we can *only* gain. For 10 months people will have heard me screaming about progressive politics and the Greens—so if we lose, it's *still* a win. And if we win, I get to scream on the assembly floor for two years. Even if I don't get a single bill passed, it's still a victory.

With you coming from a punk rock background, I'm curious: Why do this instead of be an activist or be in a band or do a zine? It's a way of addressing these issues that you never hear about in punk rock. What made you say "This is my way of dealing with it."

I saw Los Crudos in Connecticut a while back and they were talking about politics. Martin speaks between songs a good amount. About half the people were listening in rapture, but they already agreed with him. The other half were yelling "play the



song." It's very good to talk about politics socially—with your friends or from the stage—but it's so insular. Either you're talking to people who don't care or you're talking to people that are more receptive, but you're not branching out. Punk bands are going to play at punk clubs—they're not going to play at Earth Day, or the city isn't going to hire them to reach new people. ¶ It's really frustrating to me that nobody outside of punk recognizes how progressive a good portion of the punk community is. I brought a whole bunch of issues of *Punk Planet* to the last Green meeting and they said "We don't care about punk." And I had to sit down and explain to them why they should. ¶ Politics is so unsexy to a lot of people, too. People will go to a show or write a song about something they hate, and then they won't even vote against that. It's so defeatist. Boycotting electoral politics is the least successful boycott *ever*. If you don't buy V&V Cheese, they recently had a big worker's strike, they're going to have to buckle to the demands if enough people don't buy it. But if you boycott electoral politics, then the people you hate just get stronger. It's the exact inverse of what you want to have happen. ¶ I think a lot of people are also turned off by the way activists, punks, Greens, whoever, approach people. If you scream at people "Don't do this! Free this! Support this!" People just turn off because they're already so turned off by politics in general. But if you approach them and say "Hi, how are you? Do you think you're making enough money? Do you worry about healthcare?" You get them more involved. It just takes one little thing. You *have* to reach out to people that aren't like you to affect change.

That's an interesting point, especially in your district, which is a very diverse, but rapidly gentrifying district. There are a lot of clean cut, wealthy white people moving in. Being a

clean cut white person—wealthy or not—you're going to inevitably be lumped in with them to some degree. How do you stop from being yet another white dude coming into save "the others."

[laughs] I worry about that a lot. It really concerns me when I have to go into a neighborhood and connect with people. But actually, so far the hardest group of people to talk to have been white men. I don't know *what* to say to them to get them excited. I talk to black women and it's great—they're all "Hey, how are you!" My campaign manager speaks fluent Spanish, so we can talk with them. The people that live in my building are mainly Muslim and I've talked with them. And from all of them you hear "Yeah, yeah, yeah!"—excitement and connection. ¶ Race is only an issue when you don't know someone. I think when Al Gore, for instance, goes into the black community and speaks about how he walks to deal with black issues, it's totally transparent—he's not actually *addressing* black issues. He'll say "We need to end racial profiling" but he doesn't say *anything* about the institutionalization of a racist criminal justice system. People aren't *retarded*. They understand that when you're giving them a bone, you're just giving them a bone. ¶ It's great when I see it in people's eyes when I'm talking about *exactly* what's wrong in their lives because I'm dealing with it myself. I *am* worried about making my rent next month. When you're dealing with similar things, you address their issues. I think that those lines aren't as hard to conquer as we're told they are. That's why I think going out and talking to people is so important. If I can knock on somebody's door and they hear me talking about their issues, then that's worth so much more than a flyer. I've seen *genuine* excitement from people that don't know me within five minutes.

Have you had to buy a suit?

[laughs] No. I'd have to buy it at Salvation Army anyway, so it would be a little ratty. [laughs] The guy that I'm running against *always* wears a suit. He's this big guy, 30-something, and looks kind of slick. I don't want to make this about image but to a certain extent you have to think about how you come across to people. People don't want somebody coming in from the boardroom, visiting their community to do a little field research and then jetting back to the safety of wherever they live. I think just jeans and shirt or whatever I wear regularly is fine.

Where do you see this going? Do you see yourself carrying on with this 10 years from now, 20 years from now. Not in a way of saying "I'm going to try to win again." [laughs] But instead saying "I'm going to express myself through political work of this nature."

I think that people as they get older lose interest in activism. A lot of people see all the defeats and they're reluctant to come forward. That's why Seattle or Washington or whatever didn't immediately turn into this thing like the '60s. I think if I'm committed to this, I *have* to stay committed and keep pushing. But there have to be millions of people that get involved in this and push it for their entire lives for this to remotely resemble a Democratic or Republican party in scope. It's too important not to keep working for it. It's good to get people to know about things through activism and protests and literature, but you have to change *laws*. We have a legislative system we've never really used to our benefit. You've got to keep pushing. It's not easy to start a new major party, but people are coming around. It's encouraging. It's going to take time—but it's not something that happens overnight. ◎

People will go to a show or write a song about something they hate, and then they won't even vote against that. It's so defeatist. Boycotting electoral politics is the least successful boycott ever.

You had punk groups that were on major labels—the Sex Pistols and Patti Smith or whoever records that I'm buying now are independent. I don't know why hip-hop is on major labels,

The name "Molemen" is synonymous with underground hip-hop in Chicago. Every flyer and listing for a hip-hop show here seems to have the Molemen name attached to it in some way, shape, or form.

Started in 1991, the local DJ and production crew has undergone a number of lineup changes as well as expanding its talents into other branches of the music game including releasing two compilations in the last year on their own Molemen Inc. label. 2001's first release, *Chicago City Limits*, showcased local Chicagoland talent over the quirky Molemen sound. While their second release, *Ritual of the Molemen*, had them working with old school legends like Chubb Rock and Grand Daddy IU, as well as local and national underground luminaries like Juice and Aesop Rock.

I had a chance to talk with JR and Ed (aka PNS and Panik, respectively), two of the core members of the Molemen, about the local scene here in Chicago, as well as the international underground scene, the big business of hip-hop and their determination to make it on their own terms.

Interview by **Dustin Mertz**

Photos by **Ursula Sokolowska**

When did the Molemen come together?

JR: There's basically been three incarnations.

Ed: Around '91 we got some people together. In '95 we downsized. And around '99 or 2000 we downsized even more. Just recently we got incorporated, so now it's an actual business. We have affiliates that are with the crew, but we are the nucleus.

So you're kind of like covering all bases of it

JR: We're the company, everybody else is like an artist for hire.

So you're covering all the bases—DJing,

MCing, production . . .

Ed: We wear many hats: artist development, management, DJing, production, design, beat diggers, investors . . . Just all sorts of stuff.

JR: We've been through so many incarnations—it was a crew, then some members were gone. But it was still a bunch of artists—the people that grab the rings and took it over and made Molemen the reality it is now.

Before you guys started putting out your own records, did you try and find labels to put it out?

Ed: Yeah. You go through this thing when you first start out—you *wanna* get signed to a major label, but you realize there's that which you have to go through to get to there. In our situation, we wanted to be more in control of things. But we weren't gonna get signed by a major anyway—it's kind of hard in the Chicago hip-hop scene. Chicago's more known for house, blues, and all sorts of other music, but not hip-hop.

Other than maybe common or crucial conflict.

Ed: Yeah. But the odds were against us, so we decided to keep doing what we're doing. Now, we've been growing.

A lot of hip-hop artists that were on majors back in '91 are all on indies now anyway.

Ed: Exactly.

What do you think caused that shift from majors to indies?

Ed: I think that back in the early '90s to mid '90s it was still hip-hop—it wasn't pop yet. It wasn't so commercialized where you see it everywhere, like it is now. That's why a lot of groups could still be underground and be on a major. But now it's just so

commercialized and you see hip-hop *everywhere*. Now it's like, those underground cats don't sell enough compared to somebody who's doing pop.

JR: It's funny because around the time—in the early '90s when hip-hop was *real* hip-hop, and every label had a dope group or a dope roster—I was thinking how that related to punk. You had punk groups that were on major labels—the Sex Pistols and Patti Smith or whoever—but I was like, "All the punk records that I'm buying *now* are independent. I don't know why hip-hop is on major labels, shouldn't it be independent?" Then around the middle '90s, it became this independent boom. Company Flow came out and they showed people you could do the dope stuff . . .

"Independent as fuck."

JR: Exactly. That's what started the DIY aesthetic in hip-hop. As hip-hop started making money commercially, it was like "All right, we don't want hip-hop, we just want rappers talking about doing commercials for wine." That's what hip-hop is on major labels now.

Ed: It's funny though because when I first started listening to hip-hop, it was like everybody wanted to get hip-hop respect; wanted hip-hop to be recognized. Now it's been recognized to the point where it's pop.

It seems like a lot of people that were doing the independent thing back in the late '80s and early '90s, a lot of 'em just got disappointing in the late '90s. Take Q-Tip and Busta Rhymes—it's like "Don't you take yourself *seriously*?"

JR: But you see, they paid their dues, they did it the *right* way and then they saw all these people that are *not* as dope as them getting away with murder. So they're like

—but I was like, “All the punk
shouldn’t it be independent?”

MOLEMEN *inc*



The Molemen take a breather under the El.



We're gonna create something here and turn Chicago into Hollywood.

"Well, we're gonna do it too". But a lot of people kept it real and stayed broke. -

It seems like the subject matter of what gets over in the mainstream has *always* been the same—money or "bitches" or whatever. What do you think it is that keeps that as a staying power while there are masses of underground groups that don't get the recognition?

Ed: It's just the classic war of the capitalists versus the art, you know? The people dictating what sells and what should be out there are the people with the money. They don't necessarily *know* about hip-hop or *care* about hip-hop, they're just out there like "Hey, look man, you have to sell *this* many units, and we're gonna put you in *this* magazine, and you're gonna have a commercial *here*, and you're gonna have a Neptunes beat and Britney Spears is gonna sing on your hook. I don't care if you wanna do it or not—I'm gonna give you a million dollar advance so you're not gonna complain." These guys have *never* seen *nowhere* near a check like that, and so it's like "Hey, tell me what to do and I'll do it."

JR: So they're put in the position of doing it commercially and getting the million dollars or keeping it real, and busting your ass trying to do it independently.

Ed: Mathematically though, I think you pretty much get the same amount of money if you do it independently. It just depends on if you want the quick fix or if you want a longer stay? A lot of independent artists by now, they've made a nice amount of money. You have somebody like Del [the Funky Homosapien]—he's been doing it independently for years, and I'm sure he's not suffering financially.

You mentioned the Neptunes. It seems like a lot of critics are saying that the Neptunes or Timbaland are the ones who are doing crazy

production shit—that they're being more innovative than a lot of the cats in the underground . . .

Ed: It's like this: in hip-hop—or in anything—there's stuff that's good in that field and there's stuff that's bad in that field. Hip-hop is just so saturated—*everybody* raps or dances or whatever—that it's like yeah, in the commercial field there's definitely some talented artists and in the underground there's definitely some cats that can't rap and can't make beats. There's talented people on both sides of the fence. Back in the day the rule was if you sell a million units you're wack—you're Paperboy or MC Hammer. If you're underground, you're A Tribe Called Quest, Run DMC, Rakim, KRS One—you're dope. But it's so crazy now, it's just like a pot of gumbo. There's a lot of cats in the independent world that aren't that good—their whole gimmick is "I'm independent, I'm hip-hop, and *that's* why I'm dope." But that's not necessarily what hip-hop's about. It's about the music. If it's good music, it's good music. So it's not necessarily that the underground is dope either. I know we both like the Neptunes and Timbaland and people like that . . .

JR: Right now it's like, you got your Jay-Zs—you've got the rappers that will be there for a while—and then you've got like three clones. But in *production*, there's hip-hop being put out in the mainstream. It ain't through the lyrics, it's through the *music*. The Neptunes are the stars now—they're featured on songs. *Everyone* knows a Timbaland beat when they hear it. Dr Dre is killing it with *anybody* in any style.

It seems like in the past few years independent hip-hop has seen a kind of boom, with groups like Dialated People and Jurassic Five

getting signed to majors and getting put on big tours. Would you say that's tapering off at all?

JR: No. As I see it, hip-hop is so universal now. Before if you were a million-record seller then you were—like I said—Paperboy. But now, hip-hop has spread worldwide—there's gotta be a *million* underground heads. KRS One once said "There's only 50,000 real heads." Now you look and times are *changing*. Now it's worldwide.

Bringing it back to Chicago: how do you see the Chicago hip-hop scene growing as a whole?

JR: We've had people blow up here then they left the city. It's *really* hard to blow up here. They left and never looked back. But with Molemen, we have street cred. We did all this dumb shit—we did the basement parties, the illegal loft parties, we recorded people for free, did radio shows. We paid our dues.

Ed: On every side of town, every suburb, just doin' *whatever*.

JR: They know us. Look at what Slug and Atmosphere did up in Minneapolis. He's probably gonna stay there the rest of his life, so he *created* something. There's gonna be kids that can now perform where Prince performed because of Slug—because they brought hip-hop to First Ave. That's what we wanna do. We wanna make it so kids can say, "Well the Molemen are selling records! We can do that too." Instead of going to New York and trying to get signed and end up being the victim like how earlier Chicago acts used to count on other cities to blow them up. We're gonna create something here and turn Chicago into Hollywood. There's really nothing here, and we're a *major* city. To us it's gotta be Chicago, because we were *born* here. ©

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Part Charles Schultz with a Dostoyevskian spin, part *Waiting for Godot*, Paul Koob's Chicago-based *Hamster Man* comic series captures human nature's flawed beauty simplistically and allegorically. For the past 16 years, his unassuming cast of quirky, deadpan characters has charmingly championed the mundane, quietly soliciting laughs and subtly tugging heartstrings.

Upon first glance, Koob's cleanly drawn protagonist appears as little more than a peanut-shaped rodent with a penchant towards embarking on seemingly uneventful misadventures. Hamster Man's unchanging profile contains little detail, save for a dotted eye, a round nose, a tiny protruding ear and t-crossed limbs—no mouth, no . . . *anything*.

Make no mistake about the depth and genius in our hero's presence, though. Just as big things come in small packages, big sociological observations often underlie small experiences. Such is the genius of Koob's minimalist scenarios, whether they involve trying on pants, fighting evil villains like Carpet Man or ritualistically abusing close friends.

Interview by Joan Hiller

Photo by Jessica Hopper

hamster man

Could you give me a bit of background on the original formation of *Hamster Man*? Are we talking notebook doodle or high-concept, pre-meditated birthing?

The first *Hamster Man* comic was published in 1989, but the character was initially created way back in '86 when I was in the sixth grade. Hamster Man first appeared in rough little comic strips sketched on loose-leaf paper that were passed from desk to desk during class or after school. It wasn't until my sophomore year of high school that some friends introduced me to self-published comics. We all made our own books and published them ourselves under the name Rocco Comics.

Your first story lines leaned towards the action-packed, although every escapade has always been tainted with a heavy dose of the mundane. Why is Hamster Man always searching for a lost dime? Is the lost dime a metaphor for all that one might lose in the world, perhaps—or maybe he wanted a gum-ball somethin' awful?

Although I didn't know it at the time, the dime in those early adventures set a precedent upon which most future stories were based. The dime represents the motive and the futility behind *everything* Hamster Man does as a kind of worthless Holy Grail. It establishes him as an anti-hero whose decisions are made thoughtlessly, and who bumbles through mistake after mistake on his way to victory.

Or anti-victory—the victories are few and far between, and are often achieved only after undue frustration or at the expense of other characters. When did you decide to have such a sense of funny nihilism in your plots?

The early *Hamster Man* stories were written, in part, as a reaction to the popular superhero titles that dominate the comics world. Although Hamster Man himself first appeared as a super-hero, he certainly did not conform to the super-hero persona. His one super power was turning himself into a pile of bran flakes when he got scared. At first Hamster Man was portrayed as a stupid-hero who eventually made the transition

from dumb to boring. His boring qualities stuck and were mixed with meanness to form the present-day Hamster Man.

Clearly objectionable antagonists such as the Black Whiz are no longer present in your work. The Black Whiz is way meaner than Carpet Man ("a rolled up carpet with attitude") or E-Head (a fickle, snarl-toothed letter E with almond eyes and rounded feet) will ever be. Was this a natural progression, villain/antagonist-wise, towards presenting the more day-to-day misadventures instead of continuing on with the more superheroesque early vibe?

As the stories became less hero-oriented, the Black Whiz disappeared. He was the essential "bad guy" in those adventures, but didn't translate so well to the even more boring day-to-day stories. Once Hamster Man lost his cape and powers he required enemies who were at least as mundane as he was, and Carpet Man and E-Head had the necessary qualities. The villains gradually evolved from super-evil to just plain mean, which is even worse sometimes. Carpet Man is a throwback to the classic super-villain

with his lair and secret weapons, but in the end he's still just a rug.

Several of your comics feature guest-created stories. When and why did you decide to have other folks do *Hamster Man*?

The first guest story happened because I didn't have enough material to finish *Hamster Man* #6 in time for the Chicago ComiCon. A friend, Jim Milak, offered to do it and honestly it is my favorite *Hamster Man* story. He wrote and drew it himself, and his version of Hamster Man is the funniest thing I've seen. I still laugh when I see it. The story is titled "Hamster Man Goes Hunting With Ted Nugent." I have included a guest story in almost every issue since then. I usually ask someone to do it but sometimes people do stories on their own and they end up being really great. I met a guy in Kentucky once who sent me a really funny story called "Hamster Man Meets His Match" in which Hamster Man beats the tar out of Paul Koob for drawing him so poorly.

The comic is published on a scant, though long-standing, basis. Why are the issues released so sparingly? Any plans to make *Hamster Man* a more frequent thing?

For years *Hamster Man* comics were almost exclusively sold at Chicago's annual comic convention. The convention was the closest thing to a deadline I ever had, so the comics wound up being published once a year. Now that I've been getting better distribution around Chicago and online, I feel that an audience is available whenever I want to release something new. My plan is to do a couple more mini-comics within the next year and then try to do a big book containing most of the stories in existence.

There's a very simple aesthetic to what you do, which is part of what makes the stories so believable and enjoyable and translatable to everyday life. Could you explain your decision to visually represent things simply—stick figure arms, white space . . . How does that tie into the design work you do outside of *Hamster Man*?

Like good graphic design, comic art should facilitate the smooth transfer of information from paper—or the Internet—to reader. That's not to say that the art should be totally devoid of detail, but that details should be chosen carefully to represent attitudes and emotions clearly. I try to make *Hamster Man* as easy to read as possible for those who prefer to rush right through the stories—as many people do with comics—while also appealing to those who tend to spend time with the art, which is totally cute in case you haven't noticed.

How much do you and Hamster Man have in common?

The characters in *Hamster Man* are not meant to be reflections of myself, but I do recognize many similarities once I'm finished writing a story. Sometimes it seems that *all* the characters in certain stories are about me, but sometimes they seem to represent other people I know. It's easy to read a lot into this sort of thing, and you have to be careful not to take it too seriously. ☺

IT'S EASY TO READ A LOT INTO THIS SORT OF THING. AND YOU HAVE TO BE CAREFUL NOT TO TAKE IT TOO SERIOUSLY.



Paul Koob's got game in the East Village.

Two nicer people couldn't have ushered in a revolution. When Joanna Brown and Mark Freitas began Homocore Chicago 10 years ago, the city's punk scene had never seen anything like it. Somehow ducking under the Riot Girl radar, Chicago had long been famous for "man's man" music: Victory Records' hardcore, Screeching Weasel's pop-punk, Touch & Go's balls-to-the-walls distortion. For a major foothold in the early '90s identity-based movements (the twin engines of Riot Girl and Queercore) to have formed here was a welcome, if unexpected event.

Being loud, proud, and out there (I swear some of their flyers are probably still wheat-pasted to street lamps), Homocore Chicago took the city by storm over the eight years that Mark and Joanna were actively putting on shows. Initially meeting resistance from both the punk community ("What are those queers doing messing up our scene!") and the gay community ("What are those punks doing messing up our scene!"), Homocore won over many converts from both disparate groups by fighting the good and never giving up.

While Mark and Joanna aren't actively working as Homocore Chicago anymore, they are still friends and remain active in both the gay and the punk scenes (Mark heads up the New Fireside Committee, which is dedicated to finding a new home for all ages shows in the city and Joanna helped organize last year's Ladyfest Midwest). Plus, they gave countless queer punks their first taste of freedom.

As someone who was there from the beginning, it was wonderful to be able to talk with them about how it began and what it all meant.

Interview and photo by **Daniel Sinker**

To me, Homocore Chicago was such an anomaly to have started in here in '92. There wasn't really a lot of precedent for it.

Mark: Well, there was one *really* huge precedent for it—Spew. That was an event that Steve LaFreniere did at Randolph Street Gallery. That event was remarkable. There was this early Homocore movement that was started by GB Jones and Bruce La Bruce and it spread to San Francisco via Tom Jennings and Deke Nihilson. All these people were writing each other and doing zines, but none of us had really

met. I had gone to Toronto a few times to meet GB and Bruce—and actually got to be in one of GB's movies—but other than that, I really hadn't met all these people. Neither had anyone else—they'd been writing "I'm the only misfit in my town" kind of things to each other for years. Suddenly, at Spew, you had all these people coming together. They got to meet each other for the first time and it was this huge explosion of energy—I mean, it was *gigantic*. It was the big spark that set off this huge queer zine/queer music . . .

Joanne: . . . chain reaction!

Mark: Yeah. All kinds of alternative stuff just started *happening*. ¶ Joanna, that wasn't the first time we met, was it?

Joanna: Yeah, actually it was. Later, you stayed at my house. But it wasn't until I was digging through my zines and found one of yours that I realized I had met you there.

When was Spew in relation to when Homocore Chicago began?

Joanna: About a year before.

Mark: Yeah, Spew was on Memorial Day weekend in '91, and we started on November 13th, 1992.

What was that first Homocore event?

Joanna: It was Fifth Column, who had played at Spew. They were touring and one of them wrote me a letter and asked "Where can we play in your town?" And so I decided, what the hell, I'll find a place for them to play. I called Steve LaFreniere and he said "Oh, this guy Mark wants to do a queer punk night too, the two of you should get together." So Mark and I met up at a Bikini Kill show at Czar Bar and planned the first night, not having a clue in hell of what we were doing! [laughs] We met Elliot Dicks, who was doing sound at Czar Bar and he kind of held our hand and guided us through the whole process.

Was there any trepidation going into that first show—either that nobody would show up, or that the people that did show up would beat you to a bloody pulp?

Joanna: I think that nobody showing up was a fear. It took us a while to learn how to really promote ourselves. I passed out

flyers at the gay film fest and we postered like crazy—which became our hallmark [laughs]. We didn't get any mention in any of the gay press for that show.

Mark: I think *Nightlines* might have given us a plug. They were the only ones though.

Joanna: It was just dumb luck that anybody even knew about the show.

Mark: Of course it helped that Fifth Column had a buzz. It was GB Jones's band—GB Jones who started the whole damn Homocore thing along with Bruce La Bruce. ¶ By the way, if anyone wants to know what was at our little snipe in *Maximum Rock 'n' Roll* was about, it had *nothing* to do with saying that we started Homocore. It was that GB Jones, a *woman*, and Bruce La Bruce, a *man* started it, not just Bruce La Bruce. It's really important to us—and it was important to GB and Bruce too—to talk about gender parity. So for some guy that wasn't even a part of our scene to be going off and telling *our* history and and leaving women out was pretty offensive.

So you did your first show . . .

Joanna: There were like 75 people there.

Mark: Something like that, which is *brilliant* for a first show.

And was pretty comparable to a lot of shows in Chicago at that time.

Joanna: Especially the local Czar Bar shows.

Or the No Palace Studios shows—50 to 75 people was a good turnout. What happened next? When you did that first show, was the idea, "Hey, we're going to do this thing regularly."

Joanna: Yeah, we did DJ nights after the Fifth Column show.

Mark: My original idea was to not do live music—I was scared of doing live music. I wanted to do a punk rock disco party night.

Joanna: And we did like three of those.

Mark: But Mark Ruvolo [Johanns Face Records] was really persistent in saying "You know, this would be a lot cooler if you had bands." We were like, "Oh we don't know. The only reason we did that first show was because it was our friend's

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WE WERE DISSATISFIED WITH THE PUNK COMMUNITY AND WE WERE DISSATISFIED WITH THE GAY COMMUNITY, SO WE CREATED SOMETHING OURSELVES THAT WAS BOTH GAY AND PUNK.



Mark Freitas and Joanna Brown revisit old stomping grounds.

band." Even though we had one big successful show, we still doubted ourselves. Mark said, "No, this is easy! All you have to do is book my band, try it out, and it'll be easy." So we booked No Empathy and the show did great.

Joanna: It was our first regular show with bands. From then on, we were doing shows pretty much every month.

Mark: It built up pretty big that first year. I think the only bigger show at Czar Bar was a Jesus Lizard show. Our Tribe 8 show was gigantic; our God Is My Co-Pilot show was gigantic.

Joanna: People walked into that show, got in three feet and said "Look, I can't get any further" and ask for their money back. It was that packed.

Mark: And we would give it back to them.

Joanna: Yeah, 'cause we're nice people. The Tribe 8 show was our first really big show. They had a guarantee, contracts, a rider.

How far into it was that Tribe 8 show?

Joanna: In June of 1993. We started doing shows the previous November.

As you were doing it, were you conscious that this was a part of something that people were not only connecting with in the city, but outside of the city? From an outsider's perspective it really felt like with you guys here and Matt Wobensmith [Outpunk] in San Francisco it was the blossoming of a movement. And this was happening just slightly later than the rise of Riot Girl. How much of what you were doing was consciously movement building?

Joanna: None.

Mark: It was strictly boredom. [laughs]

Joanna: Really, it was like "What band would you like to see?" "I don't know, I like God is My Co-Pilot, let's see if they'll come!" We worked with Matt Wobensmith pretty closely. I was pretty close to Matt, I met him when I booked Tribe 8. He's the one that turned us on to a lot of people. He was always very supportive and we always plugged his records in our newsletter. And then there was Bikini Kill, but Bikini Kill was before us, even.

Mark: You mean in terms of the movement?

Joanna: Yeah.

Mark: A lot of stuff was happening at that point. I had always loved punk rock since I was young, but by the time I was actually coming out as a gay person, punk rock really seemed dead. It had been taken over by hardcore and a lot of macho bullshit and a lot of homophobia and sexism. So for me back then I liked punk rock kind of in a nostalgia way. But then here comes Riot Girl and suddenly I was like "OK, here are some people that actually have some shit to get off their chests. They *really* mean it." It was so incredibly more fierce and so much more in keeping with the spirit of what I thought punk rock was about. It kind of made me think "OK, punk is meaningful again." ¶ I could relate very much to feminism on a very deep level. I think there's a really close tie between fighting sexism and fighting homophobia—you can argue that however you want, I don't give a fuck about all that academic shit, I just feel it. And so we were booking a lot of the Riot Girl bands during that time too because of the close affinity between the movements.

I guess another way of wording my previous question is "How much of what you were doing was political versus promoting shows?"

Joanna: All of it.

Mark: It's all the same thing to me.

Joanna: We always saw ourselves as providing a safe place for queer youth and other queers that liked punk rock to come and enjoy themselves. It *had* to have political overtones because we were even fighting against the established gay community who weren't accepting towards us at all until Pansy Division played. [laughs] We were saying "We're dissatisfied with the punk community and we're dissatisfied with the gay community, so we're going to create something ourselves that is both *gay* and *punk*."

Mark: We were shoving it in a lot of people's faces. Anyone that remembers our flyers, we had the biggest lettering of *anybody* in town. We had these gigantic letters that were four inches tall that said "HOMO" and beneath it, four-inch-tall

letters that said "CORE." I was desperate to do something for a poster and I had an old issue of *Homocore* zine, Tom Jenning's zine, and they had a tiny little logo on the masthead. I just blew it up bigger and bigger and altered it with a magic marker until it was this big, massive, scary logo. It looked so great. You could see it from two blocks away! Having that mummified to every single lamppost, so that you couldn't take it off no matter *how much* it offended you that there were these big, huge letters on this pink poster that said "homo". That was putting a finger inside the eye of punks, hopefully. And the fact that we were putting punk stuff up and down the Halstead strip [Chicago's largest gay bar district] was upsetting to some of the more staid bar owners and shop owners there.

That was an interesting aspect of Homocore to me: the critique of the gay establishment. I can't remember the exact phrase that you had on your shirts . . .

Mark: It was a Quentin Crisp mis-quote. It was something like "A lifetime of listening to disco music is too high a price to pay for one's sexual preference." I always kind of regretted that quote in a certain way because I like *good* disco music. I wouldn't say that was our *real* critique of the gay movement. Disco wasn't really the problem. In fact, it's one of the reasons I moved to Chicago. Chicago House to me, was another underground scene that was so DIY. Chicago House during the '80s was so much more interesting to me than anything punk had happening in the '80s with the exception of a few bands like Hüsker Dü. I *loved* and worshipped the Chicago House people and the Detroit techno people. We put that on our shirts because it was funny—you would go into these gay bars and they were playing this really bad top 40 dance music.

Like Eurasure or something?

Mark: Not even *that* good. Stuff like CeCe Peniston or Crystal Waters. [laughs]

Even if the quote was not exactly what you meant, it painted a very stark contrast between what you guys were doing and what the alternatives were, especially for recently come out or not-yet-out youth. I knew people

that were like "I don't get it, I hate the gay clubs and things like that, but I go to an all-ages show and I feel like I can't be myself there either."

Joanna: That was kind of the audience we were trying to serve. We did a lot of youth advocacy, even though neither of us were particularly youths. [laughs]

Mark: At the time though, we actually kind of were. I forget just *how* young we were—that was a long time ago! [laughs]

Joanna: We hoped to make it a safe place for kids to come out—to still be gay and like punk rock music.

How long was it before you really saw that reflected in the audience?

Mark: Kind of right away, actually. I guess we can say this because Czar Bar is long gone: there were a lot of teenage kids coming into Czar Bar.

Joanna: There was *never* an age restriction at Czar Bar.

Mark: We kept an eye on them and made sure they didn't drink, but we weren't going to tell them they couldn't come in. There was no place else for them and I'd rather have them there than doing other shit.

Joanna: I remember when Glen Meadmore played, we had a 14-year-old who got in. He was gay and he wanted to come and so it was fine by me.

Mark: It's better that than have him kill himself because he feels totally alienated. Once we put up our website, we were like a lightning rod for kids that were living in the middle of nowhere and couldn't take it. I think that's one of the reasons that Tom Jennings burnt out on doing *Homocore* zine, because it was *so much* responsibility. ¶ Going to back to an earlier question: A better representation of the critique we had would be our actions at the Gay Pride parades. We would have lots and lots of posters criticizing something that would become very, very big later in the decade, which was the whole way that "gay" was being sold as a marketing niche. If you were affluent, gay, and mainstream looking, that was all that mattered. As long as you have money, you should love us because we have money—that was what it

came down to. Don't love us because we're people and you should care for *all* people and treat them with respect. No, love us because we have money . . .

Joanna: . . . and we're going to spend it in your stores.

Mark: Which I have to admit *does* work. Chester, the owner of the Czar Bar didn't know he was hosting a gay punk night . . . [laughs]

Joanna: He figured it out when he saw seeing two boys kissing! But he's like, "I don't care because I'm making *so much* money off the bar tab."

Mark: He flipped out the first time he saw two boys making out in the back corner. He was wiggling out. But later, he was like "I love gay people!"

Joanna: We were his biggest night.

Mark: In terms of bar revenue, hell yes. We were a drinking crowd—which is actually kind of sad.

Joanna: But at the Gay Pride Parades, we were trying to critique the marketing aspect of being gay—"we drink Miller Beer." "We all shop at the Gap" . . . The first year we had a huge banner that read "Proud of What?"

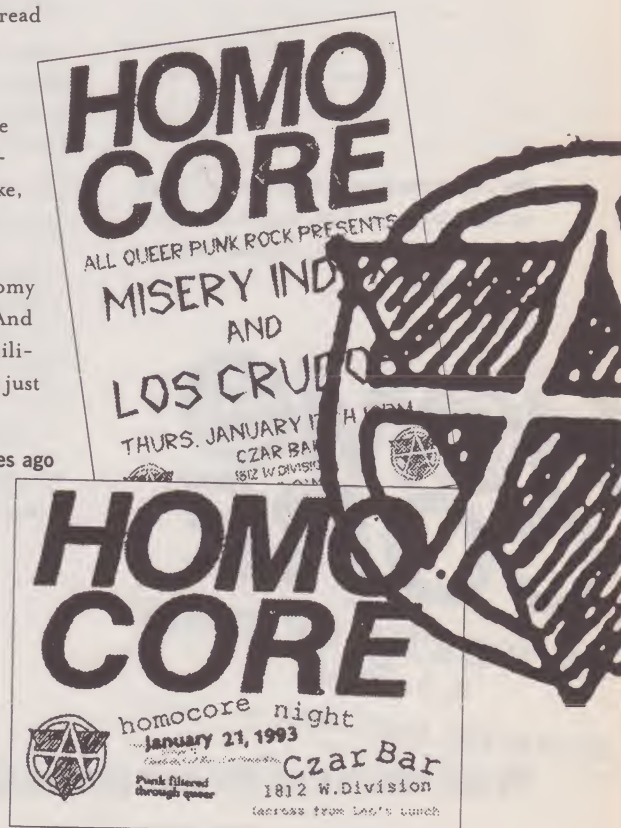
Mark: During the '93 march on Washington, that whole thing became about "Gay people can join the military and kill people too." We were like, sure we're against discrimination at that job, but couldn't we pick some better causes here? At the time, sodomy was illegal in the majority of states! And somehow the debate was about gay military and gay marriage? Shouldn't we just work on getting *being gay* legal first?

One thing you touched on a few minutes ago that I wanted to come back to. What happened when this got big? In some ways it was inevitable—because there was all this similar stuff happening around the country and the world—that this would become bigger than the two of you. I'm curious what it was like to be in the midst of that—to all of a sudden have these people spilling their guts out to you and you *had* to be the person that

understood. Or that you had to be spokespeople, or figureheads, of this larger thing. What was it like to be in the middle of that?

Joanna: I think that's when we stopped doing stuff. [laughs] After a while we just went down to a show every two or three months, just for our friends who would come through town. We weren't doing any local bands anymore. We were doing shows at the Fireside at that point, but we were turning down a lot of people who wanted to do shows with us.

Mark: They were people that we really liked, too. Our burn out hit right around the same time that things got really big. But that it was really big made it hard for us to just walk away. We walked away a bunch of times. We kept on doing these "last ever" shows. But then someone else would want a show. ¶ I think the first band to do that was Sleater-Kinney. This was before they blew up, but after that first record I was like, "Oh my god, they're so great!" So when they wanted to play a show, I was like, "Oh yeah, of course. We're not in retirement anymore!" [laughs] ¶ Every time we'd do



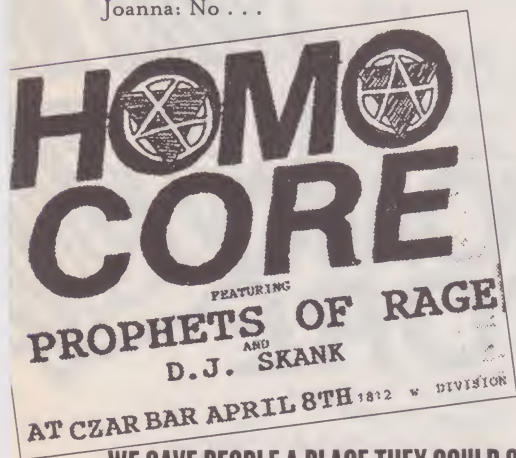
another show we'd get into it and start flyer-ing and remember how much work it was. The things that we loved about it were being overshadowed by the small little negative things that maybe at first didn't matter as much. When we first started the person at the door that was being an idiot about this or that, we'd just ignore. But after a while it's like, "Oh here's another annoying person at the door."

Joanna: The little things just really started getting to us. We were doing shows every three months or so, and then it got longer and longer until we hadn't done a show in a long time. But then Sadie Benning gave me the Le Tigre demo and I was like, "Oh my god, this is the greatest thing I've heard in years." And so we decided to really close it out right: fly Le Tigre in and do one last show.

Mark: And really make it a big thing of closure. We did a film tribute to GB Jones. When I was first coming out, she was really important to me—she and I used to write letters back and forth. I mean if you have to give credit to *anyone* for starting this, it all comes back to GB and Bruce—and Candy and Carolyn and all the other people that were part of that original Toronto crew that really had the vision or insanity or whatever to imagine this universe that *didn't* exist and then five years later it did.

You talked about the Le Tigre show coming up and feeling like "OK, let's do this one more time." Do you feel like that could ever happen again?

Joanna: No . . .



WE GAVE PEOPLE A PLACE THEY COULD GO TO AND FEEL SAFE AND ENJOY THE MUSIC AND HAVE A GOOD TIME. THAT'S WHAT COUNTS.

Mark: The Le Tigre show was really perfect in a lot of ways.

Joanna: Yeah. Mark and I met at a Bikini Kill show and planned our first Homocore show there. It was really great that Kathleen was there to close it out, too.

Mark: And our first show was Fifth Column, which was GB Jones's band and there was Fifth Column footage in the our screening of GB's films. It was a video for "Donna" which is a song they play with Donna Dresch. Donna later went on to form Team Dresch, which was another really wonderful band from that time period. There was just *so much* happening back then. It was a really wonderful time.

How do you feel about now? In the wake that Homocore has left in Chicago, there are definitely active queer punks putting on shows and making queer spaces. Do you think that's working out all right?

Joanna: I think it's great. There's the queer zone at the A Zone now. There's Scott Free's Grinder . . . There's a lot going on now, it's really good. And I'm glad it's not up to us anymore, 'cause for a while it felt that way—like it was up to us to entertain the queer punks.

Mark: It was kind of a weird thing to, where if a friend of yours didn't get booked when they wanted to get booked, it left an uncomfortable situation to be in.

Joanna: I don't think either one of us wanted that much responsibility.

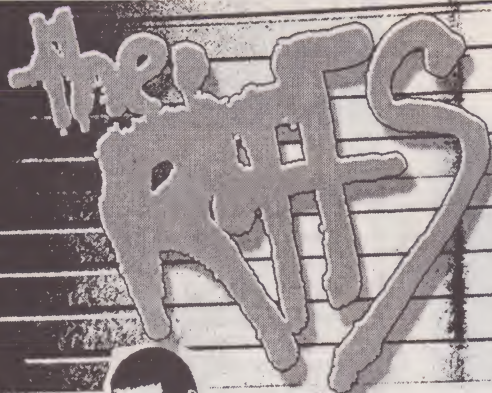
Mark: Yeah. We were not just trying to make the fans happy, but the bands as well. It became this weird, competitive thing where different friends of ours . . . I don't know. I just didn't like it. It made me really sad.

Ten years later—amazingly—looking back on it all. What do you take from it?

Joanna: People *still* come up to me and say "Oh my god, Homocore saved my life." And if it did, that's great. From the inside, I can't see that, but apparently to a lot of people it meant that. I had a person come up to me and say "Oh my god, that was the first place I didn't feel like a freak." And that's nice to hear. Maybe we *did* help a few kids—or people that were even older than kids. We gave people a place they could go to and feel safe and enjoy the music and have a good time. That's what counts.

Mark: And we had a lot of fun doing it too. The other thing I take from it is that people should go ahead and try whatever they can. Dream a little bigger than what you think you can actually do. Don't over extend yourself financially, because that's the road to ruin, but go ahead and try things. There are a lot of things you can do within your means. It'll be a lot of work—believe me, it'll be a *ton* of work—but it'll be worth it. You'll never make money doing anything in punk, at least not if you're doing it right and you'll never make everybody happy. But along the way you're going to meet a lot of really great people and you're going to learn a lot about yourself and the world and the way things work. *Anybody* that's a punk should be doing *something* and doing *something big*. That's what it boils down to for me at this point: the Do It Yourself thing. It's an open door for anyone to do what they want. And if people don't do that, then they're not really punk. [laughs]

Joanna: I think what I got out of it was to think about what you want to do, think about what you want to see and then *make it happen*. That's what Homocore was for me. God, it was what I *really* wanted. It was something that I wanted to go to and something that I would have attended even if I wasn't involved. And then make it happen—do it yourself because no one else is going to do it. That's where I come from. It's what I wanted to do. I *really* wanted to go to a queer punk night, so I made it happen. ©



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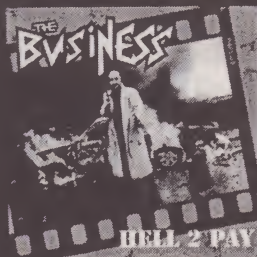
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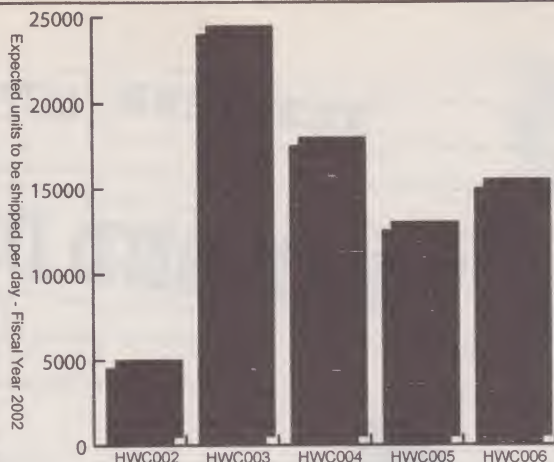
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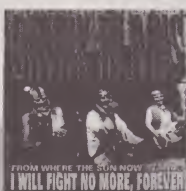
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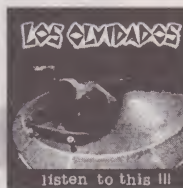
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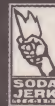
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Martin Sorrondeguy is a Chicago kinda guy. It's in his walk—like he's always on his way to kick someone's ass, he laughs. It's in his personality; in the hyper-stimulated everything-at-once enthusiasm you'd develop in a city on the make. And it's *all over* his music. A friend once told him she could hear the El trains in Los Crudos' chugging drumbeats. He's a product of his environment and proud of it. Except he doesn't live in Chicago anymore.

For eight action-packed years, Sorrondeguy sang for Los Crudos, a furious Chicago-based hardcore band that might (as we peek back into the blur of history) have been one of the flagships for the Latino/Chicano punk movement, especially in the Pilsen barrio the band called home. Sorrondeguy's Lengua Armada Records released some of the best (and eventually most eBay-able) records of the '90s—from collector-darlings Charles Bronson to outta-nowhere bands like the border-straddling Revolución X. Somewhere in there he also cranked out a video called *Mas Alla de los Gritos*, a DIY documentary on Latinos and Chicanos in hardcore and punk.

Right now he's singing in Limpwrist and Tragatelo, shooting his own photography projects, producing a one-off talk show at a local college (special musical guests: Reagan SS!), digging up ultra-rare records where other collectors fear to tread, and trying to keep his rangy yellow cat off his just-traded NeoBoys 7".

Sorrondeguy is now living with his partner in a cozy little house in Santa Ana, California, in the heart of one of America's most Republican counties, where the all-ages shows cost \$10 to get in and DIY is only the philosophy they sell you at Home Depot. For a Chicago kinda guy, it's a strange place to call home—but it's also a chance to trade a Chicago kinda perspective for something new.

Interview by **Chris Ziegler**

Photos by **James Bunoan**

So what brings you to California? I don't think anyone expected you to move away from Chicago.

It's kinda weird—it was unexpected for me, too. It was never in my plans to move out here. Basically, I met a very special person. [laughs] I came out here when I was working on my video and I met him

through a mutual friend. We got along really well and after I was done with school, I decided I was going to move out here. But it wasn't only that; I kind of felt like I needed to get out of Chicago. I wanted something new, something a little different. You know when you know a place too well? You need a new environment—so I did it.

When was the first time it really sunk in how far from home you are?

Well, not having a car in Southern California, that happened real quick—you just sit there and go, "Fuck." Chicago is an amazing city, a very *people* city, and this is more of an auto city. [laughs] It's a little sparse.

How have things clicked for you creatively here?

When you live in a large, very busy environment, you easily overlook a lot of stuff. And when things get slowed down, you start to pick up on little details. I've started finding that in my photography. I pay a lot more attention to color now, or even just to little things that happen. When I'm walking down the street and I have another person walk by me, I'm super, super observant—I'm looking at the details

Maybe you should describe where you live now—people think LA is one big blur.

Put it this way: take a chunk of Pilsen back in Chicago and bring it into Orange County, and that's where I live. The majority of Santa Ana—maybe 96 percent—is Spanish-speaking. It also has a suburban thing happening—it's not as tall and compact as Chicago, but it's similar in some strange ways. And there's a lot of strip malls. I hate them. [laughs]

Tired of pink stucco yet?

That and yellow—those colors are really typical out here. It's a very pastel environment.

What was it like for you growing up in Chicago? How is California different?

As a kid, I was just fused into the neighborhood. Me and my brother and sister played in alleys as kids—Chicago kids play in alleys, you know. I was just a piece of the fabric—I *know* that city so well! I *am* Chicago—I am a part of that! [laughs] Here,

I feel like an outsider who's come in to observe. Growing up there, I've been in so many different scenes—I know a lot of people in the city and it was good because I could get a lot of shit done. I felt really in control of a lot of things there. And when you're new to a place, you gotta start from square one. I mean, I had a lot of friends out here, too, but it's a different thing than Chicago. There, I could organize shit; I had locations where I could get things going; I could *really* make shit move. And here you start again. In Chicago, I could organize shows like crazy, and here, I'm just focusing on the label.

Your label has some pretty strong ties to the city of Chicago—is that changing at all now that you've moved?

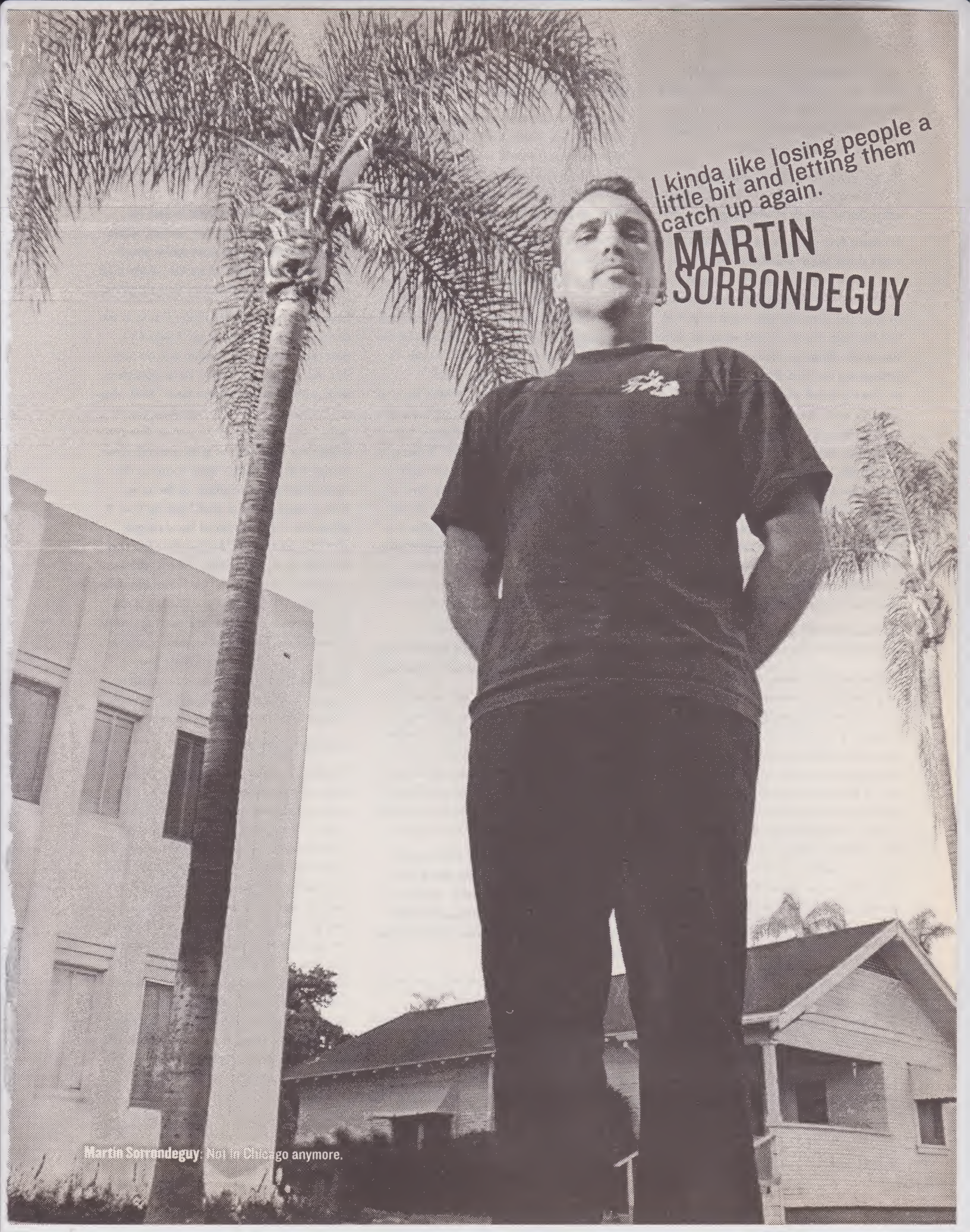
I don't know if it has. I have two new 7"s coming out by Chicago bands, I'm doing a Chicago comp, and in July I'm gonna be back there a couple weeks. I think my ties are still strong. It's a very active scene still. I'm doing stuff there, but I also have stuff going on with people here. It'd be cool to have like the Chicago/LA thing.

So next up is a Chicago vs. Santa Ana comp, maybe?

No, no, that's too cheesy! But I think a lot of stuff can happen here—there's a lot of potential, especially in Santa Ana and Southern California. Coming from a place like Chicago, I realize how much shit you can possibly do, and here the possibilities seem endless. But finding the right people to do it with has been a little more challenging.

What do you mean by potential?

I don't know if it's just the aesthetic or if kids are sincerely into it, but punk has always seemed popular here in Southern California. But there's a lot of kids who are barely scraping the surface of what punk *really* is as we know it. In California, a lot of it is a façade—everything is kind of like a front. And when you start really scraping into it and looking at things closer, there's a lot of weird, fucked-up stuff that goes on here. There's so many people you can fuck with here, so many things that could be done! And I'd love to see more kids out here seeing what their world



I kinda like losing people a
little bit and letting them
catch up again.

MARTIN SORRONDEGUY

Martin Sorrondeguy: Not in Chicago anymore.

could *really* be. I would love to see if a band like Crudos was out here, what kind of an impact that would have had. I just think, "What if?" And I think it would have been interesting to see.

Do you think the dust has settled around Crudos enough that you can look back and get a clearer picture of what was going on?

It's been four years since we broke up, but I still think about it and go, "Holy shit, that was a crazy eight years!" It's really bizarre—it's hard to look at a whole chunk of time like that and put words to it. I'm not the type of person who wants to think too much about it—I have like 8,000 projects going on, and that's what I'm looking at. I really loved what happened with Los Crudos and I'm still so happy things went the way they did, but I wanna get a Limpwrist tour going now; I wanna do a new band; I got all these other things I wanna do! I want fucking shit to *happen*. Instead of dwelling on the past, I look forward. It keeps me involved and it keeps me going, instead of turning to nostalgia. A friend of mine said, "People who are nostalgic are people who are no longer dreaming," and I like that!

How about the ideas and dialogues Crudos was a part of? How are they doing now?

There are other bands doing similar stuff and I think it's good—it has to be continual. All the things we'd sing about with Crudos, a lot of it still continues to happen in all different areas. I felt like we were part of something at a certain time, and I like to see how things evolved—it wasn't just about one band, it was about a whole scene of people. ¶ I got this e-mail from this guy from Colombia, and he was like, "I'm really into the US Chicano/Latino punk thing you guys got going on." And he named all the bands—"I want anything and everything from all those bands!" This is a person from Colombia writing—that's rad! And so even though Crudos in particular has ended, that communication is still going. ¶ On the other side of things, I saw two interviews in *Maximum Rock 'n' Roll* with bands from Spain saying, "Oh yeah, since Crudos stopped, all of a sudden it's not cool any more to have bands sing in

Spanish." And that makes it seem like a fad—and it's not a fad!

How do you look at yourself right now? I could call you Martin from Crudos, Martin from Limpwrist, Martin from Lengua Armada, Martin from *Mas Alla de los Gritos*—there's so many things you've been involved with. What do you identify with the most?

All of it. I *like* that I'm not just Martin from this one thing. I kinda like losing people a little bit and letting them catch up again. I have this friend who's a DJ, an old skinhead from Chicago, and he called me out of the blue a few days back and was like, "So what are you doing?" I said, "I have this new record by my band Limpwrist" And he's like, "What? *You're* in Limpwrist?" He followed me through the Crudos stuff but he was laughing—"I never made that fucking connection!" I like that. I don't like to put it all out there right away—a lot of bands do that, like "ex-members of," and it's like, "Fuck the ex-members—let people take it for what it is." As far as my projects, I can't identify with just one thing because I am so many things. I think most people are so many things, but we tend to cling to one to describe them.

Is there anything that links it all together? Any single idea or theme that connects everything?

I think a lot of the themes are just self-reflective: things that get me really upset, things that bug me, things that are transgressive, things that cross boundaries. I don't know if there are recurring themes, but I can't put it in words just yet—I think there are, but it'll be another 10 years until we'll probably be able to link it all up!

I notice that border-crossing a lot in your work, whether it's literal—like taking the band on tour all over the world—or just metaphorical. Where did that come from? How did you decide you were going to cross so many lines?

The whole idea of borders is such a weird one. I've always been kind of this "other"—being in America but being from somewhere else. And then being the "other" even within the "other." It's just so layered. Being queer in hardcore punk, being Latino in hardcore punk, just being

a punk, being a punk that's a teacher—it just goes on and on. That one Crudos album was called *Songs to Liberate Our Borders*—and it's not just physical. It's mental and internal borders that we kinda put up or are faced with. I think it's something we all deal with.

Do you think you're at a point in your life where you've found your own identity, where you're comfortable with what you're about? Just going through that whole list—that's a lot to learn about yourself and try to put together.

I am really comfortable where I'm at as far as my person. Ten years ago I wouldn't have been able to be as open as I am now. For me, at my age, I don't have a problem with putting things on the line: "Well, this is just the way it is." If I talk about sexual politics or sexuality, that's just it. I'm not gonna run and hide or poke around these things—I'd just rather leave it out in the open. I'm in a good place, as far as my own person, and I'm glad I can do that. I think that's where a lot of the strength that's in the things I do lies. You put that shit out there and kids go, "Fuck, this is crazy or cool or weird," or "I can identify with that." It's not just me putting it out there for someone else—it's putting it out there for *me*. It's like some kind of therapy—you write a song, you create something, and it's not just to educate other people. You're in the process of learning yourself. We're all feeding off that.

Was that a hard place to get to?

I definitely wasn't like this all my life. I used to just bottle stuff up and be like really afraid and really just angry with myself. If I was walking down the street and you said, "Hey, fuck you!" to me, I would carry that for like two weeks. Now I've learned to just brush things off. I used to take it all in and internalize it and go, "What's wrong with me? What's wrong with me?" But it's *not* fucking me, you know? We all will get there—at different times, maybe, but we all will get there. There's kids who are going through really crazy times, but the shit's gonna calm down. It's gonna play itself out, you're gonna figure the shit out, and it'll be all right.

That's interesting that you're saying you'd be freaked out by confrontation—if you look at the bands you've fronted, it seems like you were exposing yourself to confrontation all the time.

I think something happened at some point where I just said, "OK, I've had it. This is it." By the time I was ready to take on the Crudos thing, that was the testing ground—just becoming really vocal. And when we did our stuff, it wasn't like everybody sat there and just dug it. No way! There'd be fucking arguing back and forth, fighting, shit-talking—but something like that needed to happen. *Especially* in Chicago, it needed to happen. For being the city that it is, it needed shit like that. When I first got into punk, I thought, "This is just fucking radical rebellious shit—it's gonna be fucking totally counterculture alternative stuff!" And then I realized, "Holy shit, this is *so* not that!" But there were some people who were doing things that *were* counter, who were doing things as an alternative—people I think if I said who they were, people would be like, "You're fucking kidding me!"

Like who?

In the very late '80s and early '90s, Ben Weasel of Screeching Weasel! That dude would talk so much shit but in what I thought was a positive way—he called people out on shit *constantly*. He would put everything on the line and just say shit to people. And he also created an alternative: He was bringing in these amazing bands and the DIY thing resurfaced with cheap shows again. Because before he was doing it, everything was getting in the \$10-\$12 range—it was inaccessible. When I was a younger punk, I had no job, I didn't have money and everything was starting to become really expensive. The people who controlled everything at the time were milking *everybody*! So it was cool there were people who were just fed up. Me and my sister would go to shows with our little flyers for boycotting shows and we'd almost get beat up for it—and then to find other people who thought and felt the same way, it was like "Right fucking on!" Los Crudos was an extension of what I learned in that DIY scene—taking it on a whole different level and having control of what we were

doing. With Ben Weasel, there were people who *hated* him! A lot of old Chicago scene people hated him because he would call them on how stupid they were, how fucked up they were, how ridiculous they were—every scene needs that! If I ever became full of shit, I hope there's kids out there ready to call me on it! When that whole scene of people came around during the late '80s, that's when Chicago needed to evolve—and it did. They were some nasty fucking people around in the late '80s, a lot of violence, and it had to evolve.

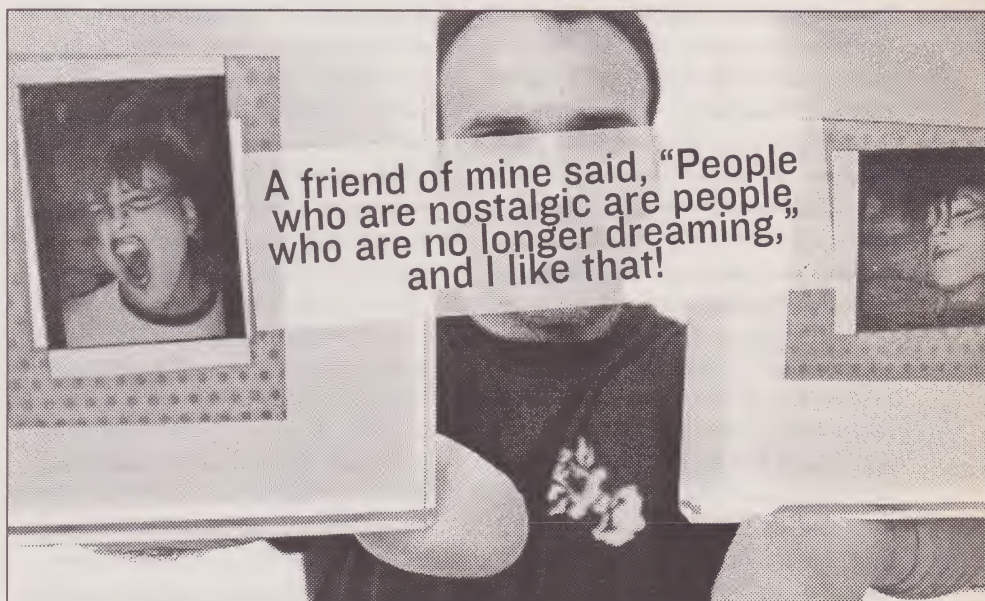
What was Crudos involved in that had been missing?

Punk in Chicago at the time tended to be a north side thing—or very suburban, like

gonna take it in that direction—try and generate that energy into those areas.

What made punk so necessary? Why did you look at your neighborhood and say, "There needs to be a scene here"?

For young people in cities, and especially my neighborhood, there's really not much for kids to do. Yet everyone's really quick to talk shit on how kids are fucked up—"It wasn't like that when I was a kid." Bullshit. It was *always* fucked up. Kids are not given an alternative, yet everybody's trying to push them here, push them there, "do this, don't do that," and it's like there's nowhere they can go. Especially being from an area like that—I went to this south side jock all-Catholic boys' high school—



way south suburban. But in the inner city, there wasn't this thriving punk thing. So Los Crudos started playing like crazy—we came out of our neighborhood, doing all these shows in Pilsen or Little Village on the southwest side, and we started building this following of people that you'll *still* see today. This whole scene developed, and that's what we wanted to see. When you talk about parts of the city that are more marginalized, this is where that stuff *should* be happening. For me, it wasn't making sense being a punk in that type of environment and there not being a fucking massive punk scene. So we decided we're

automatically all the Latino kids that came from our area were all from this particular gang, so that was the stereotype. It was really ridiculous. That's not *even* going into the shit that was happening in the neighborhood: the police brutality, the people constantly being taken advantage of because they were undocumented, the gang thing going *beyond* out-of-control. If you're a young person in those kind of situations, you're constantly having to look over your shoulder to make sure you aren't going to get the shit kicked out of you. You're a target. ¶ Walk through Lincoln Park and then walk through

Pilsen. Lincoln Park constantly has clean streets, not because the people are cleaner but because they have a lot of money and city workers are constantly going and cleaning it up. Our fucking sidewalks were busted up, the neighborhood was all about to collapse; if a gang fight broke out and there's shooting going on, the police wouldn't go until way later. In those kind of circumstances, kids are pissed. A lot of urban kids now, they turn to hip-hop and they find their outlet through rap music. It was awesome for me—I came from that originally—and I think that's cool, but when I see kids getting into punk, I'm like "Right on!" That's what I identify with a lot—it's a lot more confrontational

I didn't know you came out of the b-boy scene!

The people who are still around from the first wave b-boy scene know who I am. We were all part of the same thing—I was this big manic breakdancer. That was the first time I found a way of venting, a way of escaping; that was my first time as a keeping-out-of-trouble thing. That was probably in 1982, when I was 15. We came together with kids from other neighborhoods from similar situations and we were communicating and dancing with them—which was cool because before you didn't do that. Kids fought with kids from different areas. That was the first time I experienced this kind of coming together with people and doing stuff. My friends would ask me, "What are you gonna do when this is done?" And I would tell them, "Be a punk." I knew it—I *totally* knew it. People laughed!

So did you just shave yourself a mohawk one morning?

Well, it was a little trickier than that because of my home situation. I was always fascinated by the punk thing—my cousins were punks in New York. The whole b-boy thing made sense to come out of an area like mine, but punk didn't make sense at all. There were no punks in my area.

You talk about punk as a vehicle for social change in really practical terms—what do you think you need to build a scene, to generate this kind of community?

I think desperation, boredom, and cre-

ativity. When you become desperate, you'll do *anything* to make something happen. Even me being here at 34, there's still moments when I feel claustrophobic, like, "Fuck, I need to make something happen!" Punk makes it so easy that you *can* make it happen. Things don't have to be high tech, don't have to be professional—you have your own standards, you can make your own shit up.

Is that as true today as it used to be? It feels like punk is being glossed up, pushed away from DIY and taken out of the hands of kids—like standards are being set.

Kids have to realize doing it yourself doesn't mean it's gonna be easy. DIY means it'll be harder! A lot of kids who get into punk these days don't have punk in their hands—it's packaged for them. What we tried to do and what we hope happens is that they toss that old idea out and learn about *real* punk: What's the fucking heart and the root behind it? Then it's in their hands and once they have that, it becomes more gutsy. That's what moves me, keeps me into it. ¶ But you're right: most kids, where are they going to buy their punk? They're going to the record store. But what's the record store? The CD store. And what's the CD store? The CD store is Tower, is fucking Borders, is Sam Goody's. There's so much safe punk out there right now, it's kinda weird. When I started my label, it was so different. There was no Internet—it was *pure* mail-order. I'd be going to shows to sell my fucking records. People who remember me from Chicago remember me having a stack of singles up my arms and going, "I'm selling records! Anybody wanna buy punk records? I'll tell you anything about any of these bands if you have any questions!"

Like the Avon lady!

Totally! I was like the Tupperware salesman of punk! And that's the way I got rid of stuff. And some kids still do it, they take a box to shows. I *love* buying records at shows! Fuck the stores—there's a couple that are cool to shop at, but some of them are out of control. I like to keep my things in certain people's hands. I love it when kids write me and say, "Martin, I just started this little distro, can I take five?"

and I'll say, "Yeah, you can take five, I'll give 'em to you at cost!"

What about international bands? It seems like there are a lot of barriers for bands to get their stuff—or even themselves—over to America. And it seems that America tends to overlook or ignore scenes in other countries.

It's kind of tragic—with those scenes abroad, most of the stuff those people buy is American stuff. So where's the give-back? Any person who's in an American hardcore band who talks shit about foreign scenes is moronic. Those are the people who buy your shit. Do a tour there and you'll have a lot of people at your shows. I'd like to see more of a give-back. But it goes in waves from certain countries. Anything from Japan, people fucking love it. Especially hardcore—they're *fanatical*.

I see you've got your Lip Cream shirt on.

Yeah! [*laughs*] Sweden tends to have a lot of push, but with other countries in Europe, there's not enough stuff being supported—the Czech Republic or Poland, places that have had scenes *forever*. That's not even including the Latin American scene or Southeast Asia. There's some really big scenes happening. And it's getting in the hands of very few people here.

So what's a way to keep in touch with those scenes?

You have to be a fucking *total* fanatic. I have an advantage—I run a label, so people send me stuff. And I'm constantly trading with people. Pen-paling is the best thing you can ever do out of punk. If you are really interested in getting a hold of people, do this: if your friend puts out a record, grab like a little stack of them and just send them to people overseas and get something back. When you write to people, they just don't tell you about the scenes and the bands, they tell you about life—"Oh, things are really fucked up here!"—and you can really have good conversations with people. Now with e-mail, it's like going to your neighbor and knocking on their door. It's a good opportunity to learn.

What about Mexico and the Latin American scene? There's so much cross-over between the

US and Canada, but there's hardly anything coming or going between the US and Mexico.

The Canada-US relationship has been strong for so long that you can't really compare it to the US and Mexico. The only reason why the US-Mexico relationship is very strong is because there are so many Mexican people living in the US. If 300 women were found murdered in the woods between Canada and the US, there would be a fucking international uproar about it. But 300 women were found dead in the desert in Mexico in Juarez and people don't even fucking know. Or they don't care. ¶ With the punk scene, you have a lot of people here who are all about the "old scene." You wanna experience the old scene? Go to fucking Mexico City, it'll blow your fucking mind. That scene is so huge and so crazy and so raw. When we went there the first time, it's like, "Whoa!" ¶ There's also the thing about resources: Mexican punks can't really come over here while Canadian punks can. Maybe once in a while you'll get turned back, but Mexican punks can't even cross the border—they don't have visas and they need permission. The whole economics of punk in Mexico—it's a very poor country, a poor scene, and very little gets made—it's on cassette. Kids here are like me: I want vinyl! I'll get the cassettes too, but I'm a big vinyl freak, and most of the vinyl is between the US, Japan, Europe and Canada. But in Mexico they're doing CDs and they're doing cassettes. In Santa Ana, there's tons of kids that are into these bands from Mexico that people here don't even know exist.

Did you catch Fuerza X when they played LA recently? I was told they were the first Guatemalan punk band to ever play America. What's their story?

I asked them, because Guatemala isn't known for having a very old scene. They said there's this woman from France named Kathy and she has family in Guatemala. She would go to Guatemala and visit, and she would take music to kids. They said Kathy brought a lot of shit over there.

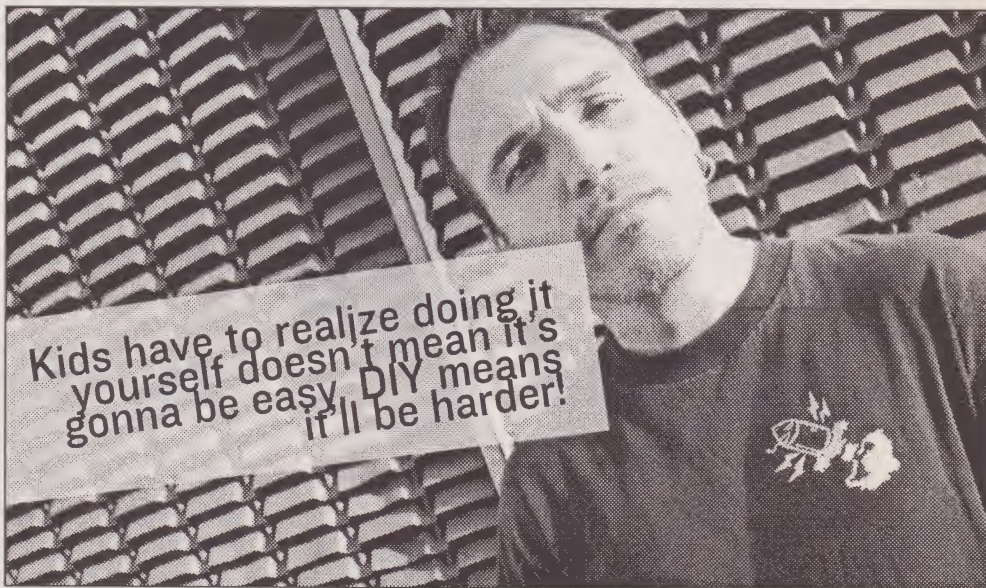
So you can trace it all back to one person?

Kind of sort of. I think there might have been some stuff before, but where people

became familiar with the really DIY stuff, that was linked to one or two people. They said it was Kathy. She brought tons of stuff. And that's sometimes how it happens.

Talk about DIY!

It's not like a huge scene, but there's a couple of bands. And I don't know how they figured out their tour, but they had people here who were willing to help out. They kind of only played around the West Coast—they didn't go too far up north either. But it's great—bands from Guatemala! I'm just very supportive of stuff from everywhere!



What's going on now that excites you? Where's the energy now?

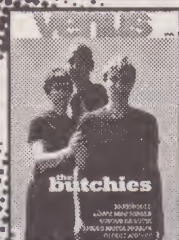
I'm so immersed in this punk thing—sometimes it freaks my partner out. He's like, "What the fuck are you up on? What are you on?" And I don't know—I find myself going in two directions. I want the totally new stuff that's happening and I'm constantly researching the old stuff I missed out on. As long as it's got this raw, hard energy, I'm into that. But I won't go to shows of old bands that reform. I wanna see the new kids. And that's what keeps me going. I bought a single by two bands from the People's Republic of China—shit like that, it interests me! I like to see that other kids in other parts of the world are doing it. It's just so linked up with politics and rebellion and I love that. Whenever I can hear a new voice, I'm on it.

You're so tied to hardcore, but your taste in music just covers everything. You seem to get that energy from all over.

Things that really move me are just kind of "off." I mean, I'm a huge punk freak—that's like the number one thing—but then there's a tragic little gay bar here in OC, the Frat House, that I like. There's this drag show that's just so funny and so "off"! I like seeing really campy shit, really kinda twisted shit, especially in a time when everything is so prim and glossy and high tech. I love it. I wanna roll around in it! Because life is fucking campy; life is fucking twisted.

What do you miss most about Chicago?

I miss my little favorite Mexican restaurant right down the street from my house called Tayahua! I also miss the other Mexican restaurant I love, El Farro, on 26th St, that has vegetarian chicken sandwiches. I miss my friends like crazy. I miss the great hardcore punk scene. I miss walking down the streets. I miss the El and just riding the trains. I miss 18th Street. The Jumping Bean Cafe. I miss Huck Finn's at two in the morning—it's this south side donut shop where every fucking south side freak/weirdo/cop/punk/anything hangs out. I miss my family . . . There's so much stuff. But it's not far away—I can get back there when I need to. ©



We get a lot of letters saying "I've been reading *Spin* or *Rolling Stone* for years and I just discovered *Venus* and I'm so excited I found it."

Amy Schroeder has the eye of the tiger. You can tell by leafing through the slicker-than-they-should-be/prettier-than-they-could-be pages of her zine (don't call it a "magazine" or they'll get sued) *Venus*. You can sense it when you peer into the bedroom that functions as the base of operations for the zine. You can hear it in her voice when she talks about why she's putting so much effort into losing so much money. The eye of the tiger is so there, I had half a mind to search her small apartment when Schroeder went to take a phone call (from Kelly Deal, no less) to see if I could find *Survivor* tucked behind a closet door grinding away at their *Rocky III* megahit. The eye of the tiger is most definitely in *Venus*.

Venus, which Schroeder has been publishing on and off since she was a 19-year-old, is poised to be the next big breakout zine—ready to bust out like *Bust*; to get giant like *Giant Robot*. After buckling down in 2000 (before that, she had been publishing about one issue a year), Schroeder and her team of volunteer writers and editors have been putting out one of the most consistently engaging reads to come out of the underground in a while.

Dedicated to women and music (although slowly creeping into women in other media territory and tossing a few token dudes into the mix as well (full disclosure: I was the debut guy in their "penus" section)), *Venus* keeps its editorial focus lean and ready to tussle. Aiding *Venus*' ascent from the pack of other women-oriented music magazines is the zine's commitment to independents (not to mention their belief that women can rock instead of simply wishy-wash). While not exclusively indie-only, DIY bands, fashion, films, and more get a fair share of the limelight in *Venus*. Instead of sidling up to the majors and their Lilith-Fair women's ghetto attitudes, *Venus* seeks the real deal out from the source. And God bless 'em for that.

Interview by **Daniel Sinker**

Photo by **Nicole Raja**

What made you want to start *Venus*? Did you know what you were getting into when you did?

No! [laughs] I've always wanted to make a magazine. I actually made my first fanzine when I was 12 years old. I was in middle school and lived in a suburb of Chicago called Naperville. I didn't know it was a fanzine then—I'd never even heard of them. It was called *ASN*, which stood for "After School News." I would interview my friends and type it all up on an electric typewriter, print it out and make Xerox copies of it. That was my first fanzine. I think it was five pages long. ¶ I went to High School and was an editor at my school paper and was *really* into that. From then on I just knew I was going to work in magazines somehow. I didn't know if I was going to have my own or write for one or what, but I knew that's what I wanted to do. ¶ Then I went to Michigan State University as a journalism major and worked at my college paper. I was doing *too much* journalism. I was going to class and studying journalism and working for the paper full time. I was bored of studying it in class when I was learning the same thing hands-on at the paper, so I quit my journalism major, changed to women's studies and all of a sudden I had all this inspiration. I knew *exactly* what I wanted to do: I wanted to do feminist press. ¶ I started *Venus* as a really small fanzine when I was a freshman in college—I was 18 or 19 years old. I had a Brother word processor with one font and three font sizes—nine, 12, and 36. I would type everything up, print it out, cut it up, and paste it onto another piece of paper, throw some photos in there and that was my zine. Back then, I didn't have a music focus. I had a little bit of music coverage—punk bands around town—but it wasn't just women in music. It was whoever's music. The rest of it was more personal fanzine stuff—the adventures of Amy and my best friend Julie—and feminist rants and stuff. At my college paper I started getting more into entertainment writing and then that's when *Venus* took on the music focus. I was learning how the music industry worked and how to interview bands that weren't just in my town. ¶ I had an internship at a magazine in San Francisco called *SOMA*

and became their music editor while I was still in college. I'd do their music section and e-mail it to them. But the stuff that I couldn't cover in *SOMA* or other magazines that I was freelancing for, I would cover in *Venus*. A lot of those bigger magazines I was writing for weren't so excited about independent women's music. They were into independent men, but not the women. I needed an outlet and *Venus* was the perfect place. It grew naturally from there.

What's the timeframe you're talking about there? When was the first cut and paste issue? When did it take on more of a women and music focus? And when did it turn into more of what it is now?

The first issue of *Venus* came out in late 1994. All throughout college—I was on the five year program in college because I switched my major—I released *Venus* whenever I felt like it, or could get it out—once a year basically. When I graduated school, I went to New York and started on issue #6. I had interviewed Chibo Matto and was going to put them on the cover, but I moved to New York and it never happened. I kept designing and designing the same issue. I lived in New York for only four months and ended up moving back to Chicago and redesigned the sucker again [laughs]. It took me a year to get it out. It was a whole new chapter in life and I was trying to deal with that. *Venus* is so personal to me that it just couldn't come out. That was the first issue that I printed 1000 copies of and the first issue that went national. ¶ After that, I went to San Francisco and worked on issue #7 that had Mary Timony on the cover. *Jane* magazine ended up writing a review of it and I got all these mailorders. All of a sudden it was like "Fuck! This is *for real* now." I decided it should come out on a regular basis. This was in 2000 and I decided to get serious. I would publish quarterly, and I printed 2,000 copies of the next issue. And it went from there. ¶ Now we're up to 5,000 copies of the new issue and it wasn't enough, so we'll print 8,000 copies of our summer issue. Whatever we can afford, whatever we can do, we do it.

It's interesting that you come from a really long-time journalism background. That's dif-

ferent than my own experience and different than a lot of other experiences of other zine people that I know. It has always seemed to me that a journalism background is almost a hindrance to doing a zine because it's drilled into your head that you have to do it a certain way; that you have to follow certain rules; spend a certain amount of money; have a certain number of staffers. It seems like a lot of people that I know that came from that kind of background are either freelancers or they work for "real" magazines. Do you feel like that background helped you, or did you feel that there were a lot of hurdles you had to jump or rules you had to unlearn to be able to work the way you do now?

I think both. My journalism background has helped me in a lot of ways because I learned a lot of important stuff that I think you need to know as far as ethics go. My journalism ethics are very important to me—I'm very old school about it. To me, you have to cover *people*, that's the goal. You want to cover what other people are thinking. You yourself are *not* supposed to be the focus, as opposed to a lot of the "new" journalism that is all about *me me me*. I'm against that kind of celebrity-journalism. I can see why it's happened, but I'm more into the old-school journalism theory of it being a working-class profession. You work hard, you cover people and what they're thinking; you're basically documenting history and telling a story. Learning that was really important. ¶ But as far as lot of other stuff that I've learned in the magazine industry, I haven't liked a lot of it. Advertising is a huge, huge issue and that's always disturbed me. I ended up leaving some of the publications I worked for because I was asked to do a lot of stuff that I didn't agree with. I don't even know if I'd call what they do "journalism" though—it's more like marketing and advertising.

Which is most of what masquerades as mainstream journalism nowadays.

Yeah, and that sucks. For me, it's a combination of going by the stuff I learned that I agree with and shrugging off all the crap and just setting up my own structure for how I wanted it to go.

What gave you the impetus to think that this could even be possible? I'm just confronted

so often with journalism-trained people that tell me what I'm doing with *Punk Planet* is impossible—that it's not possible to do what we do. I'm curious—what led you to believe that this was possible?

Well, I never stayed in journalism school long enough to take the business courses! I basically took journalism 101, the history of journalism, and then I quit because I was learning the production end at my college paper. So I never learned the business of making a publication. And that's the part that I'm learning now, and I don't want to know how it works completely because it sucks—distribution, money, taxes . . . that's the stuff that I have to spend so much time on now. But I think if I had understood the business of running a magazine, I might not be doing this. ¶ We're just barely breaking even right now. I think what keeps me going is that I love it so much. I love the production part of it so much that it's going to have to work because I can't do anything else. It's so much a part of me now that I can't picture not doing it. I wake up in the morning and I'm doing it. When I go to bed at night, I'm still doing it. To me, it's going to have to work. ¶ The way we make it right now is we have fundraisers—big parties and have bands come and play. That's how we're paying our printing bills. Within this next year, we should make our first profit. At this point, everyone that works on *Venus* is volunteer—all the editors are volunteer and we pay for photographer's expenses and writers' expenses, but everyone volunteers.

Do you have another job then?

Yeah. I've worked at least 40 or 60 hours a week at another writing or editing job this whole time. I've done *Venus* in my spare time. Basically, I work all the time. But I just quit my day job two months ago. I have this feeling that *Venus* will be able to make it on its own, so I'm just working as a freelancer now. Random, part-time, freelance stuff. The rest of my time now goes into *Venus*. Now that I've quit my day job, I can actually get on the phone and sell ads. Before, I did all my ad sales on e-mail, because I couldn't call anyone from work during the day!

Does it make you crazy sometimes that you have to think so much about everything but the magazine? Instead of thinking about content you have to think about things like "Where's the money coming from?" "Where are the ads?" "Where is it getting distributed?" "Am I getting paid from those distributors?" What, ultimately, makes all of that bullshit worth it?

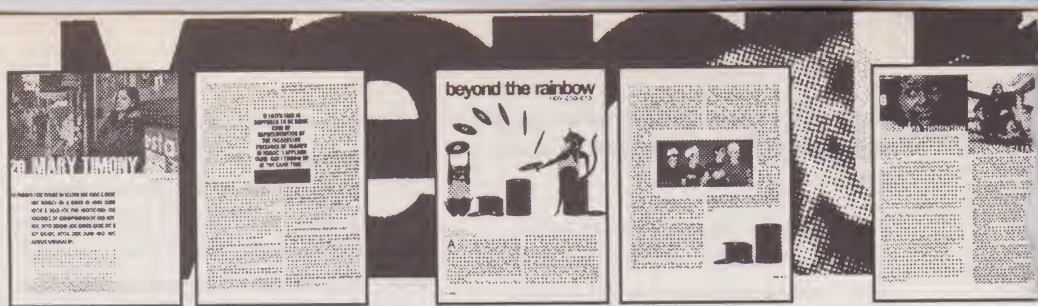
It's true. I think I spend 60 to 75 percent of the time working on the business of it—calling distributors, calling stores and making sure they have the issue, making sure advertisers pay . . . I probably spend three to four hours a day just on e-mail. I don't get to spend as much time as I'd like to now on the actual creative process. I guess what keeps me inspired is that there are so many people that contribute to the magazine—we have about eight editors that contribute and 30 to 40 writers or photographers—and they love doing it. For them, it's this outlet where they get to do what they want to do. A lot of these people are struggling just to get their work published. They're amazing people doing this great stuff and I get excited when they're excited. I love seeing their work in print. I love working with them. And when I do get a chance to do an interview, or write an article, or work on design, that's what I love. To me, it's worth doing all this grunt work so that I can do the creative work when I get the chance.

The argument that's been posed to me when I go off on a complaint spree about all the bullshit work that has to happen is a simple one: Why not ramp it down. So I'm turning that around to you: How important is it that *Venus* is on really nice paper and has national distribution—because that creates a product that is so expensive to produce that it necessitates all of the bullshit. Is how it's produced a result of growing popularity and inertia, or is how it's produced part of what it is?

As far as the quality, to me, that is one of the most important parts of it. The making of a magazine is a craft. The craft of producing a magazine, of producing this collection of photos, writing, design . . . I love the package; all of that good stuff coming together. I love all of that detail and work so much. I want the quality to be the number one thing. I'm more concerned about the quality than it being big. I love design so much that I want it to look good. If I print it on shitty paper, which I have done in the past, it makes a difference. ¶ As far as distribution, it's so important that it gets out there. It's such an expensive process and you hardly make anything on each copy of the magazine after you take out mailing cost and distribution fees or whatever, but one of my favorite things is going to my PO box and getting a letter in the mail and it's some girl who's 16 and she's excited that she discovered *Venus*. We get a lot of letters saying "I've been reading *Spin* or *Rolling Stone* for years and I just discovered *Venus* and I'm so excited I found it." For them, it's a discovery and I love that. Knowing that they found this new space, this new outlet for women to show their work—I love that. It's important to me to get it out there for them.

Obviously, the magazine is about women and it's about music, but what made it stand out to me when I first saw it was that it wasn't just about women and rock. It takes into account how that music is made—corporate vs. independent—I hadn't really seen that before. Most of the "women in music" magazines I've seen didn't critique the system itself. However, you don't have an anti-major label policy and you do cover some women artists on majors. But overall the zine tends to lean towards the independents. How do you achieve the balance?

I'm really interested in bands that have a good story. For me a lot of that time it





Amy Schroder at the Congress Theater.

I always want to get to the bottom of who a person or a band is and where they came from. I'm always fascinated by finding out what a person's day job is.

means the history of the band. Take Le Tigre for instance. They're not just Le Tigre, they're the sum of their members and their member's pasts. I always want to get to the bottom of who a person or a band is and where they came from. I'm always fascinated by finding out what a person's day job is. As far as major label bands that we cover, there aren't many, but there are definitely some. We don't just cover anybody though.

As the zine gets bigger, does deciding what goes in get easier or harder?

Both. We have a lot more access to interviews that we didn't have access to before. Publicists and bands will call us and ask us to feature them, as opposed to when we had to do a lot of that work, asking "Please can we do this." Now we get so many offers to do interviews with bands that we can't cover everybody. But it's easy and it's hard.

How much do those unsolicited calls factor into the process?

Not too much. We still cover who we want to cover. Sometimes publicists get annoying [laughs]. We know who we want to cover. But we're also concerned about timelines. We get pitches that want to do an interview

with a band whose record came out two years ago. That's not timely—they need something new coming out. Even though we only come out four times a year, I like to be timely. I think when you're covering music like we are, you want it to make sense. It needs a fresh angle. It's like "This band has a new record coming out, so that's news. So that's a good angle, in addition to all these other angles." I want to know what the scoop is.

Do you ever feel limited by your editorial direction—just women and music? Do you want to cover women in other art forms or life choices? Or is music a huge enough area that it won't get old?

It's such a huge area. There are so many bands and so many women that aren't getting covered elsewhere, so to me there's a huge, huge area that you definitely have enough stuff. But I am becoming more interested in covering women that are doing other types of work. There are so many cool women doing great stuff, that I really want to cover them. We're covering more filmmakers, more activists, spoken word artists, women who own small businesses too. We're definitely expanding.

Where do you see *Venus* going? Or do you concentrate on that? Are you more focused on the present issue than future issues?

I was talking to a friend of mine recently and said, "Man, what happens when I'm 70?" [laughs] I don't like to think that far ahead because it's too hard to fathom what it's going to mean. I'm obsessed with *Venus*. It's so personal and so much a part of my life that I'm always thinking about it. I guess I always think of myself being 25 years old and doing this. But it's true that I'm going to be 40 years old and will I still be able to do *Venus*? I don't know. It's scary to think about. ¶ Ultimately, I think that *Venus* is going to continue to grow and continue to get better and better. That's one of the parts I love most is knowing that we're not perfect—that there's so much more to improve on and get better at.

Do you ever see the possibility of *Venus* happening without you?

[laughs] It's so much a part of me that it's hard to picture myself not being involved in some way. I think my role might take a different form because I might feel like someone else could do a better job than me. But at least for now and at least the next 10 years it'll still just be me trying to balance all this stuff and get other editors to head up their own stuff.

But it's interesting because you just said "for the next 10 years" which is a pretty sizable amount of time to be thinking ahead already. Do you actively think that far ahead?

Oh yeah. This is my life. I have no plans at all to get out of this. I've already worked at other publications and wasn't fulfilled doing their projects. I've always been so fulfilled doing my own project and collaborating with people on my project. I've never been completely fulfilled working on someone else's project. When I go and work for someone else or even picture myself being an editor at a different magazine someday. I already know that I'm not going to be fulfilled. Even if they said, "OK, you get to start your own magazine," it wouldn't be the same. It would be like "Why are you saying that? I'm supposed to start with no money in my bank account and figure it out all on my own." It just wouldn't be the same. I think this is it, as far as I know. ©

AARON

Though police brutality is rampant around the country, Chicago's boys in blue—in particular the Area Two unit on the city's South Side—have gained national (and even international) notoriety for their systematic use of torture and racially-motivated tactics.

The national media, Amnesty International and even papers in Europe have reported on the reign of Jon Burge, former Area Two commander, who was fired in 1993 after an internal investigation found him and his deputies guilty of the brutal and systematic torture of over 60 black men and women. Criminal charges were never brought against Burge, and he now lives in Florida running a sport-fishing operation. While Burge fishes in the sun, the scandal continues to haunt the

city, including State's Attorney Dick Devine, who has been blamed for direct involvement in covering up and failing to investigate the torture and possible wrongful convictions connected to it.

Many inmates as well as family members and activists working on their behalf have struggled tirelessly to break the silence about the torture at Area Two. Among them, one man, Aaron Patterson, has stood out as a particularly vocal rabble rouser and thorn in the side of Devine and the whole administration, spearheading his own international media campaign from his solitary confinement cell on Death Row in Pontiac, Illinois.

After years of maintaining his innocence in the double stabbing murder of an elderly South Side couple who allegedly ran a fence

for stolen goods, Patterson is at a critical juncture in his struggle for freedom. The wheels of justice have been slowly turning in his case since he obtained a new evidentiary hearing from the Illinois Supreme Court that enabled him to bring up issues including his systematic torture and his original attorney's alleged incompetence. His lawyers at the People's Law Office and his mother JoAnn say they are confident that Patterson will get a new trial and eventually be released.

However, in early April of this year, Patterson received a setback when Cook County Circuit Court Judge Michael Toomin ruled that while defense attorney Brian Dosch's work may have been "ineffective," it did not significantly affect his case. (As this issue went to press Patterson's lawyers were preparing for another hearing before the Circuit Court based on the alleged torture and other issues that could likely lead to a new trial.) Toomin replaced Judge John Morrissey in Patterson's case, after Morrissey, a former prosecutor who repeatedly stonewalled Patterson's claims of torture, publicly called his People's Law Office attorneys "idiots." Despite the recent setback, Patterson is steadfast in continuing to fight for his unconditional release. With characteristic stubbornness and determination, last winter Patterson actually *turned down* an offer of freedom in favor of continuing the fight to prove his innocence and bring Burge to justice.

On October 2, 2001, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that Devine had offered Patterson a deal in which he would be released from prison within several years if he withdrew his allegations of torture and said he was guilty of the 1986 murder of Vicente and Rafaela Sanchez. The offer came after Patterson's lawyers filed a motion for a new trial.

Patterson refused the offer, saying he is innocent and will fight his conviction to the end.

"They're wagging a key in front of my face," said Patterson by phone from Pontiac Correctional Center. "But I never even gave it a second thought. I'd rather spend 15 more years in prison than admit to something I didn't do."

Introduction by **Kari Lydersen**

Interview by **Daniel Sinker**

Illustration by **Jebb Riley**

PATTERSON



How did you end up on death row?

I don't know if I can phrase this in a short version—we could be here *all day* trying to explain this. I've been here going on 16 years. I was arrested on April 30th 1986. I was arrested for a double murder of an elderly Mexican couple, who were allegedly fencers—people who buy and sell stolen goods. ¶ I was tortured in the police station—I had a plastic bag tied around my head. The police told me that if I didn't cooperate with them, that they would keep on suffocating me with a plastic bag and beating me. So to keep them from doing that, I agreed to go along with whatever they was telling me to say. They was telling me, "You went to this house to do this and that." And I was like, "Whatever you say, if you say so." That's all I kept repeating. They wrote up a confession that they made up and they was ready for me to sign it. And when they brought it to me to sign it, I refused to sign it. Then I was threatened by John Burge with a gun. He told me if I didn't sign it and do what I was told to do, that what I got earlier would be a "snack" compared to what would happen to me if I didn't cooperate. So at that point in time I just said, "To hell with these people, they gonna have to kill me 'cause I ain't gonna sign this false confession." They tried to get me to do a court reporter's statement, I wouldn't do it. They tried to get me to repeat what they wanted me to say on the tape recorder, and I wouldn't do it. ¶ It got so bad that I found a paperclip on the table and I scratched into the metal bench what they was doing to me. I thought they was going to kill me up in there. I wanted to leave a message letting *somebody* know that I didn't die up in here. You know how they always trying to say it was an accident or he hung himself because he was so distraught—I wanted to leave a message in there to let somebody know that if I died, it *wasn't* no accident. I scratched a bunch of stuff on this bench and I scratched something on the door. The way I scratched on the bench, you really couldn't see, 'cause I was sitting on it too. They didn't really tell what I had wrote 'til like seven or eight days later. And when the detectives found out that I had wrote this, they wrote a memo to

John Burge tellin' him, "Hey this guy Patterson wrote all this stuff in the interrogation room." We've got that memo now. ¶ My lawyers went down there on I think May 27th to take pictures of the scratches I did. By then, Burge and the rest of the detectives knew exactly why he was there, 'cause they had seen what I had wrote, so they was like, "Naw, naw, we ain't gonna allow you to come in here and take those pictures." But he had a court order and they got it checked out by the states attorney, so they was forced to allow him to take photos. I should have tried to seek publicity then, but I listened to my lawyer say, "Hey don't do it, things are going to work out." I think I could have blown the case *wide open* in 1986, but I went along with what the lawyers told me to do. ¶ After I was tortured, they charged me with the case. I went before this judge for arraignment. In front of the judge, I blurted out everything they did to me at this police station—against the wishes of my lawyer. She was telling me, "Don't say anything" and I was like, "Leave me alone." I blurted all this stuff out about what they did to me. And if it wasn't for that, I wouldn't have gotten *no* action on this case now, because that's what the Illinois Supreme Court basically used. ¶ The thing is, there is *nothing* on my record that says I kill old people, or do burglaries, or robberies . . . *none* of that is on my record. There's *no* physical evidence pointing to me being at the crime scene—wasn't no stolen property recovered from me linking me to the case. They found a fingerprint on a radio that was hidden on the back porch and it didn't belong to the victims and it didn't belong to me or anybody else that they tested. When we requested this fingerprint to do an automated fingerprint ID test, the state *refused* to turn over the evidence and they said that they don't know where the radio is. There were some bloody shoe prints that was found at the house, I guess from whoever killed the people. It didn't match my shoe prints. How could I have stabbed these people? If you stabbing somebody and all this blood is going everywhere, it's *impossible* for you not to step in blood. ¶ The thing about my case is that people really just focus on the torture

issue, and it seems like the other issues involved in my case outside of that get little or no mention at all. My biggest concern is that I want to prove that I'm *innocent*—not just a victim of torture. I tell lawyers and other people this: I don't just want to get out on a technicality. I don't want them to just say, "OK, we throw out this confession because you was tortured, but we not actually *saying* you innocent."

I try to imagine myself put in that position and forced to live where you're forced to live. I don't know how I could do it. How do you do it?

It would be hard to put words to it. A lot of people don't understand when you innocent, that it's like a *defiance* in you, being locked up for something you didn't do. A lot of time lawyers, friends, and family say, "You got to be patient and things gonna work out." But I've been in here since I was *21 years old* and now I'm 36. And I'm sayin, "Man, I think patience has gone out the door." I *hate* when people tell me "just be patient." I've done watch innocent people get executed! I've seen Girvies Davis get executed. I heard about how Gary Graham went kicking and screaming about how he was innocent. I know that this system is not beyond killing an innocent person. ¶ And my whole life is just being *wasted* away up in here. How do I recover 15 years or more? You would think that after 13 innocent men been released off death row, the governor—the court system as a whole—would say, "Well look, let's see if we can find more innocent people on death row, first and foremost." That was the whole reason that he had the moratorium was 'cause of his concern that other innocent people were on death row. But he hasn't done *anything* to seek out these cases.

Instead they're just looking at death row in general.

Right, they generalizing everything. They say, "Let's do an overall review." OK, well while you all are doing an overall review, my *life* is in jeopardy in here. I'm in an environment now . . . they got the segregation population on the other side of the building. There's like a little tunnel between the

My biggest concern is that I want to prove that I'm

building and on the other side is all these guys that are mentally ill that they threw in segregation. And all hours of the day and night, they beating on the door, beating on the wall, setting off sprinklers in their cell, fire alarms going off, loud banging, screaming, yelling. And then you've got the guards going into cells extracting them—beating them up, macing them. And the pepper spray comes through the vent over here. I'm in an enclosed cell behind a steel door so I'm getting all this mace coming in my cell. This is *at least* once a week. These are the things that I have to deal with daily. I'm just working on my case and dealing with everyday issues of life outside, but I got to deal with all this drama round here too.

So how do you do it?

I ain't got no choice. The only thing that keep me going is my hope of getting out of here. I've got 30 years in seg. I've been doing a lot of protesting in here about prison conditions and mistreatment of inmates. We used to do major protests every time they executed somebody on death row. I was kinda leading the way and I got a lot of years in segregation because of that. I'm not complaining about doing that, 'cause it was something that needed to be done. I felt it was wrong what the guards were doing, it was wrong how they was treating us in here and I wasn't hesitant about responding. So I've got 30 years in seg. ¶ Being in segregation is much harder on death row than in population. For your yard period they've got us going into these individual "pods"—they call them pods, but they're really just dog cages. They put each inmate that's in seg in one of those cages and you're out there for two and a half hours. That's demeaning, you know? My visits are all behind Plexiglas. I only get two visits a month for one hour each and they're Plexiglas and I'm chained to a stool on a chair with a waste chain in handcuffs and leg shackles.

With Plexiglas, that kind of precaution seems ridiculous.

That just shows you how cynical the administration of the prisons is. That's just their way of getting back. Ever since

they come up with this new prison reform thing; they just been going above and beyond the norms of securing this prison.

So things have gotten worse since the moratorium?

Yes they have. That's the thing people don't know. They always hear the governor saying all these delightful things about the moratorium, but this man hasn't even taken any steps to come down to death row to see what's *really* going on. He talks about his concern about the system being broke and innocent men being on death row or other issues, well why don't you come on down here and see what you talking about? He hasn't come down here and done *anything* to tell the prison administration to give these guys some air. You've got 13 guys walked out of here, there's got to be some more. ¶ I don't know about these other guys that have been released off death row. They're not as passionate or outraged as I am. I'm a very vocal and outspoken, radical person. When you see me walk out that door, you're going be hearing all of that. I'm really going to give it to them and I think they aware of that. That's another reason they slow dragging my case. They hope I catch a prison case in here and do more time, or I get killed in here or handicapped seriously. They not beyond that either. They beat up Nathson Fields in Menard and then they beat him up in county jail when he was granted a new trial. He should have been out like two years ago, but since the prosecutor's delaying his case, he just sitting there. And while you're sitting there, you subject to having your brains beat out. That's another thing we have to deal with in here.

How do you think all this has changed you?

Oh man. It's like a *mean* wakeup call. Its like living a nightmare, but at the same time it's a wakeup call about exactly how this system works—or *doesn't* work. The scary thing about it is that I used to believe that because of the lifestyle I lead out there—I was a gang leader and all that—that I might have brought all this drama on myself. But then, when I got on death row, I seen that it wasn't just the black guy or the guy that's into gang activity that they try to ramrod. It could be *anybody*. It

could be a white guy, if he don't have the finance or the contacts, he could be ramrod-ded. That happened with a guy up there in McHenry county by the name of Gary Gauger. It could be a black guy like Madison Hobley, who worked a nine to five every day and didn't bother anybody, wasn't involved in any kind of criminal activity. If they want to hook you up, they can *hook you up*.

In your estimation, how much more time do you think you're going to have there before you can have a new trial and get out?

That's the scary thing about it. I don't know. I really couldn't say how long it's going to take. But I'm going to do *everything* in my power to press the issue, to speed it up. ¶ The state isn't beyond continuing a lie. That happened in several other cases before mine. Ronald Jones took the DNA test and then it took them two or three years to let him go. That needs to stop. Until they pass legislation to hold these prosecutors more accountable for they actions, it's going to keep on happening. The prosecutors have an obligation to seek out *justice*. If they have information showing that you innocent, but then they try to fudge over it or distort the facts, that's a *crime*, man. ¶ When I said I wouldn't sign their paper, they said "OK, well if you won't sign it, we're going to say you said all this." I was like, "How you going to do that, I ain't *say* that." And they said, "Who they going to believe, you or us?" And they showed me. Fourteen, 15 years later, they *still* believe the police. My signature ain't on there. I didn't write this stuff up. I didn't say *nothing* on tape, there's no murder weapon . . .

Once you get out, how do you think you're going to lead your life?

I'm gonna get involved with the political system—do some political activities and work on social issues . . . I'm going to try to do a whole bunch of things. I'm a very active person, you know. I can juggle more than one ball. I'm *definitely* not going to be doing no gang activities. If anything, I'm going to reach out to those guys and get them more involved in this political process because I think it's *very* integral with what's going on. ©

***innocent*—not just a victim of torture.**



In a city full of galleries that cater to the upwardly mobile collector and the already established artist, Heaven Gallery brashly showcases unknown local talent and gives the people what they want: great art without the pretension.

Heaven, a 4000 square-foot loft space located in Chicago's Wicker Park neighborhood, is run by Dave Dobie and Doug Lussenhop, neither of whom have a fine art background. Dave has a degree in English and Engineering from the University of Illinois at Chicago and has been everything from a bike courier, local nightclub DJ, party promoter, and most recently a computer consultant. After getting fired from his last day job he decided to start focusing on Heaven full-time. Doug is a videomaker who holds a degree in film from Columbia College Chicago and is also an electronic musician and DJ. He coordinates the film and video at Heaven and even slips some of his own videos into the program on occasion.

The duo have opened the gallery doors to performance artist Jodie Mecanic, Pilgrim—a group of Chicago-based fashion designers—numerous local and national filmmakers, painters, and sculptors, Critical Mass, and even Ladyfest Midwest.

Because they have no formal art training, Doug and Dave have no preconceived notions of what an art gallery ought to be. They refuse to focus on one genre, creating a space that welcomes new talent and never gives viewers the same thing twice.

Interview by **Jen Thomas**

Photos by **Elizabeth Moser**

How did Heaven Gallery start?

Dave: I was living in the Flat Iron Building [across the street from Heaven's current space] and having a lot of parties. When I had to leave there, I found this space and thought it would be a great place to continue throwing parties. It evolved into the gallery from that. I built most of the walls, refinished the floors, hung new doors, registered as a not-for-profit, and Heaven became official. Our first show was in September of 2000.

I remember seeing the space when you first moved in. The floors had been painted gray, the walls had a different configuration, and the doors weren't hung yet.

Dave: I worked on the floors for about a week straight. Then I put up the walls. I

think it took about a month to get the gallery to its current state. I basically paid for it with my credit cards and maxed them out. I'm still paying them off. We're looking for more funding right now.

Where does your current funding come from?

Dave: Well, all of our openings are free, but we take a percentage if the art sells. We charge for screenings, book, and magazine events. All of that money goes straight back into running the gallery. We both freelance and do odd jobs while working on the gallery, but we actually lose money to run it. It would be nice if we could break even.

Doug: Sometimes we have fundraisers to cover rent. We had an Atari tournament. About 200 came for the event. We charged



Doug Lussenhop and Dave Dobie
get a birds-eye view of Wicker Park.



five dollars at the door and everyone was happy to contribute. We had about four different consoles going—Combat in one room, Tank in another. We projected games onto one of the walls. Hopefully it will become an annual thing.

Dave: At first we renting the space to artists, but it just wasn't working out. Some of them were having bands come in when we didn't know about it and having parties that were the size of raves. They were taking advantage of the space.

When did you start showing film/video?

Doug: A screening for the Around the Coyote festival [an annual arts festival in Wicker Park] was our first show. Then in December of 2000 we hosted the Z Filmfest which was presented by

NeoKino.com, a web site for independent and experimental film. And I've started doing the Heaven Video Series on a regular basis. Before it was just word of mouth in terms of letting people know when we were showing films.

How do you decide what to show in the gallery?

Dave: We just go with our own personal aesthetics when it comes to having shows.

Doug: But we do have a set of rules that we go by: no blacklights; no glitter; no dayglo or glow in the dark; no Christmas lights. But we can bend on some of these rules. *[I look over towards a huge installation involving black plastic, some sort of white spider web stuff, and black lights. They bent the rules this month.]*

Do you approach artists or do they approach you?

Doug: There's a little of both. We do have to turn people away sometimes. Most of the time people approach us for release parties and gallery shows. I approach most of the filmmakers about screenings.

Heaven's always got something going on, whether it's an art show or a video screening. I can't keep up.

Dave: Yeah, we have at least a show a month and two video screenings a month. We've had theater groups in here as well. Flushpuppies was one. Calvin Johnson performed here in a performance piece titled *The Paper Opera*. He put pieces of paper under chairs and the audience was supposed to find the note and then get up



During the Atari party someone bled all over the place. We found blood in the freezer, all over the floor by the heater, and then in the bathroom. How did blood get into the freezer?

and do whatever the note said. For months afterwards I was finding these notes under chairs leftover from that. ¶ We almost want to cut back on some of the stuff that we do. For the month of March we had stuff every weekend—sometimes on both Friday and Saturday nights. We don't want people to get burned out on it.

Doug: And we want to continue to keep showing quality work.

In terms of film and video, will you show anything or do you turn stuff down because you find the content offensive or boring or badly edited?

Dave: We always want good stuff, so we like to look at it first.

Doug: But we show most everything.

Dave: We've had some people get offended and leave. We don't want to say "no" to people, but sometimes a film's so offensive that people walk out.

Doug: We try to keep it short and sweet. Even if I don't like it, if it's short, I'll show it anyway. If I don't like it, it doesn't mean that someone else won't like it. If everyone likes every single video that we show, then we're doing something wrong.

Speaking as one who's attended both all-encompassing film festivals and your video series, I definitely prefer your "less is more" attitude toward film screenings.

Doug: I kind of think that some festivals are overkill with 100 films a night and all kinds of bands in between. We do two screenings in a night—one at eight and one at 10. And we only do about five or six films at once.

Dave: We also show films on the roof when the weather gets warmer. We set up chairs out back and project films onto the wall of the building next door. *[Dave had the first roof screening of the season planned the day after this interview, but rethought it when I mentioned that the temperature wasn't supposed to rise above 45 degrees. He was visibly disappointed.]*

How did you get involved in the Critical Mass art show, which was a protest to coincide with Chicago's annual auto show?

Dave: Jim from Critical Mass approached me about the show. I used to be a bike courier, so I thought I'd let them have the space. I left the curating up to Critical Mass and just offered up the venue. If you took a picture of yourself on your bike, you got into the opening free. We put all of the photographs up and by the end of the night they covered an entire wall. Some people were even naked on their bikes. They went the extra mile.

And did the folks from Ladyfest approach you as well?

Doug: Blythe came to us about using the gallery. We showed women-made films in the large gallery all weekend and had an art show in the smaller space.

I've heard that you've had to tone down some of your events due to noise. Have you had any problems with police?

Doug: We used to have bands play for magazine and book release parties. There was a noise problem with the bands, but we still have DJs at openings.

Dave: One time someone threw some bottles at the train out back and the neighbors called the cops. I was wearing flip-flops and ran to the door trying to lock it and keep the police out. I started yelling, "Private party! Private party!" I was trying to hold the door shut with my feet in flip-flops, but the cops pushed their way in. They picked me up and threw me out onto the sidewalk. I lost one of my flip-flops. They apologized later. Since then, we've been trying to keep it more low-key and adult.

Tell me some of the other weird stuff that has happened since you've been in the space.

Dave: One morning I was being interviewed for a segment on *Artbeat Chicago* [a local art show on PBS]. The night before we'd had a screening and a huge party. The place was trashed—some girl had puked in one of the spaces—and I was still wearing the same clothes from the night before when the people from *Artbeat* showed up. So I hired a homeless man and woman from the alley to come in and clean the place. I was in the other room doing this

interview and the homeless couple started drinking our leftover beer. Then our maintenance guy, who doesn't speak English very well, came in and said, "Electricity I make!" and started drilling and working on the wires the whole time the interview was going on. They had to keep stopping the filming because of the drilling. I kept thinking that they should really have been filming the homeless people and the maintenance guy in the main gallery because it was far more interesting.

Doug: Those homeless people were living in their car for months. I used to give them money. I don't see them out there anymore though.

Dave: Oh, during the Atari party someone bled all over the place. We found blood in the freezer, all over the floor by the heater, and then in the bathroom. How did blood get into the freezer? ¶ Sometimes word gets out about an event here and some crazy people show up. Someone spray-painted and tagged the gallery, punched the heater, and put holes in the bathroom door.

Doug: And then we had a skateboard video screening one night. Someone head-butted someone else and a sculpture got broken. Dave had to take the one of the broken pieces to Home Depot and match the paint so we could put it back together before we could tell the artist what had happened. We also had skateboards and merchandise being thrown around. I had to stand in front of this delicate sculpture and keep stuff from breaking it.

Do you ever feel like you'll outgrow the space?

Dave: No, I don't think so. I plan on staying here as long as I can. Sometimes I feel like I want to take a vacation from it, though.

Do you see yourself running Heaven indefinitely?

Dave: Yeah, there are a lot of fringe benefits that go with it. Sometimes I get some free art—that's one of the things that I hoped to achieve by starting Heaven. And sometimes people leave behind extension cords and equipment. That's always nice, too. ©



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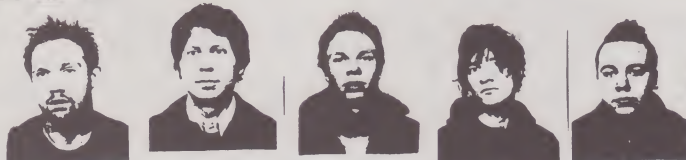
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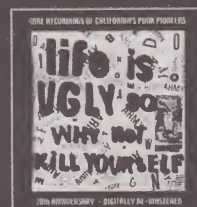


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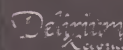
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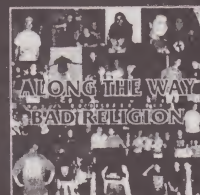
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BURNING
POSS

The first time I ever heard about Tortoise was when a friend came over to my house in Toronto one cold and windy evening in the winter of 1995. He'd just purchased their debut LP, the epic *Millions Now Living Will Never Die*.

"We finally have a band that knows how to channel Krautrock properly," Neil declared as he excitedly waved the record in my face. "Just listen to the bass lines, they sound exactly like Neu!"

Truth be told, it sounded like Neil was right—this was the closest thing I'd ever heard to the original. However, there were so many other elements to the record, it was impossible not to invoke many other band names and musical genres before the record was over.

The synthesis Tortoise seemed to be engineering was profound in its scope. *Millions* felt necessary, given how everything we were being bombarded with at that point in time—from pop-punk and emo to grindcore and grunge—was beginning to come across as being a tired retread reaching out for some long gone—albeit nostalgic—original. *Millions* sounded like a necessary summation of the history of rock and roll by a wonderfully thoughtful band getting ready to add its own unique chapter.

Over the course of several more full-lengths culminating in 2001's phenomenal *Standards*, Chicago's Tortoise has largely fulfilled that promise. Transgressing every conceivable taboo about what a rock group is *supposed* to sound like and breaking down the boundaries between rock, jazz, electronica and even dub, Tortoise have come to epitomize what mainstream music critics call "post-rock"—an ill-defined semi-genre whose lack of discernible content remains an insufficient way to describe Tortoise's imagination and creativity. Darlings of nearly every music publication and veterans of numerous significant past and present groups ranging from Slint and Gastr del Sol to the Chicago Underground Duo and Pullman, the members of Tortoise stand at a midpoint in their career. Given how much they've accomplished to date, it's impossible to imagine what they'll come up with next.

In the midst of working on their next album, Tortoise's Jon McEntire and Doug McCombs sat down over sandwiches and talked about their past, their present, and their future.

Introduction by **Joel Schalit**

Interview by **Joel Schalit** and **Daniel Sinker**

Photo by **Calbee Booth** for **Snapcult**

The thing that strikes me about Tortoise is how insanely prolific you are. How do you turn it off?

John: I feel like it's kinda hard turning it on these days. Everything seems like it has come to a grinding halt.

Has that always been the case, or is that something new?

John: It's always a sort of frustrating process to start on a new Tortoise record. For whatever reason it always feels like everything could shatter and scatter into nothing at any moment. Then, somehow, we pull it together and we're at least able to finish it. I can't speak for everyone else, perhaps they feel differently, but it's very nerve wracking to me. It's exhausting in a way. It feels very frustrating.

Doug: The reason most of us do so much other stuff is because it's an attempt to keep busy doing what we do and remain active; to keep ideas going. It's true that occasionally we meet a wall or reach a point where it doesn't seem like anything's really clicking and you have to wait for it to come back again. With Tortoise we're sort of waiting for it to settle down a little bit so that we can come back with some new ideas.

John: Our last attempt to work on some stuff didn't really . . .

Doug: . . . I think it amounted to a lot actually. We just don't know where to go with it or how to finish it off. That's what we're waiting for now. It's a crapshoot. There's no way we can force it because I don't think any of us would be satisfied with the results.

Isn't that how the creative process works for most artists? Sometimes you have periods of frenetic activity and sometimes you have to take a break and let things renew themselves independently of your desire to make your art a day-to-day thing?

John: That's true. I think that I always forget that. I always think "Jeez, maybe I should just go jump off a cliff or something because maybe it's just gone." It's always very extreme for me. It's either on or it's invalid.

Doug: I think the only difference is that most people are willing to throw any piece of shit out there that comes to them.

How do your side projects figure into this? You

guys have so many. How do they figure into needing to take a break at this point? Do you feel the same way about your other projects, or is this strictly related to Tortoise?

Doug: Right now, things could be clicking smoothly in one group and not happening in another. That's usually the case. That's another reason why we have these other things—so that we can have some place to retreat to or something else to do when things aren't exactly flowing in another area.

With the new work not clicking the way it should, what are the signifiers when things are working? How do you know when it's never going to click again, versus "OK, we're just going to have to come back to this in a couple of months"? How do you make those decisions?

John: More than anything it's the friendship that we have—the connection we have as people that makes it comfortable enough to be able to hang out with each other long enough to see it through to some kind of resolution. It's possible—or probable—that Tortoise won't be a band forever. But I also like the idea of us being a bunch of old men playing together—not that we're not that already. I love that idea, just being gray haired old guys playing weird music.

Doug: In the Fred Anderson way, not in the Grateful Dead way! [laughs]

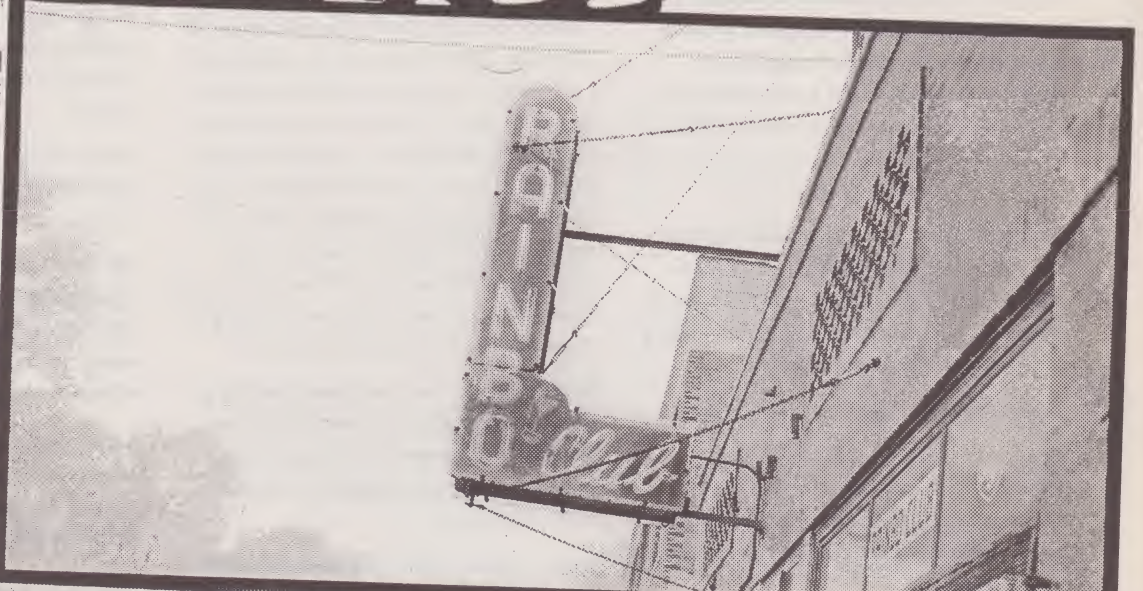
John: In the AMM way. [laughs] We're all just going to start smoking way too many bongos and jamming!

If it's more about playing music with the same group of people year in and year out, where does making records fit in? Are you sitting down and playing with the intention of making a record, or are your albums simply documenting a year's worth of working together?

Doug: I think that we put out records because that's the way we like to see the end result. It's everything we've been working until they end up being something that we like, then we end up putting them on the records. That's always the end result for me—to see this object. I love playing with the people, but the end result of doing that to me is to hopefully see a record because that's when I can breathe a sigh of relief and say "we finished this thing," and for 30 seconds be satisfied with myself

TORTOISE

For the most part we're just playing tunes. We're not going out there and being the Acoustic Hookah or something.



Tortoise (less one) kicking it at the Rainbo Club.

What's your creative process like? Do you guys bring a number of ideas together and start working them out, or is it a pastiche?

Doug: It has ended up being more of a variety of different ways of working and getting whatever works for each particular song. In the last couple of years, some things we've played a lot we've worked out in rehearsal and other things we've built up in the studio. Some things that we build in the studio, if it's not really going anywhere, we try and play it a lot. If it's not really going anywhere, we end up finishing it later. It's all those things.

I'm curious how you work because perhaps more than any other group of your generation, you guys have helped resurrect interest in abstract instrumental music without falling into a "hippie jam band" category.

John: Well that's good to know! [laughs]

Doug: It occurs to us that from time to time there's a really fucking fine line between being an interesting instrumental band and some fucked up jam band. I hate that shit.

John: For one thing we don't really "jam."

Doug: A lot of people don't realize that.

John: Mostly what we do is play the tunes. There'll be little bits and places where things may stretch or have some differences from night to night, but for the most part we're just playing tunes. We're not going out there and being the Acoustic Hookah or something. [laughs]

How does your punk and indie rock background factor into all of this? How did playing that type of music lead you to making the kind of music that you do, which is an entirely different way of approaching song structure?

Doug: In Chicago there's always been a lot of cross interest between punk rock, jazz and 20th century experimental music. That's basically where we were coming from. We were always interested in those sorts of things and started incorporating them into what we were doing.

What were the precedents for that cross-pol-

ination that inspired you?

Doug: Things like what happened in New York many years ago. I'm not so sure about the West Coast, but some of the SST stuff was definitely going that way.

John: Holy smokes, there's Glenn Branca, The Swans, Sonic Youth . . .

Doug: I met a guy from Liquid Liquid the other day. There's a band that definitely . . . I wouldn't say we were thinking about Liquid Liquid at all when we started the band, but I think there's a band that has a pretty direct line between themselves and what early Tortoise was doing. They must have been thinking about some of the same things that we were. We were aware of them, but we weren't consciously thinking of them when we were starting Tortoise.

Then what were you consciously thinking of when you started? I can't imagine that you thought you'd become poster children for some poorly named, amorphous, rock-critic-driven movement.

Doug: [laughs] Yeah. We weren't thinking that, for sure. The main thing that I was thinking about was that I really wanted to have a band with Johnny. I was just thinking about things that my current band at that time, Eleventh Dream Day, wasn't doing, that I wanted to do.

John: I was thinking about how much I wanted to try and experiment with different tonal and rhythmic things that I wasn't able to find in the other bands that I'd been involved with. Dub techniques and using drum machines, taking advantage of the studio and using it in another way other than just documenting a live performance and hoping that by loosening the structural boundaries of what was perceived to be a rock band—at least in terms of what I'd been involved with—and opening the possibility of being able to do that would create some cool shit. [laughs] Doug, I think, was feeling the same way. Plus, we had both been in these loud, bombastic guitar-oriented rock bands—which I still love—but there was a conscious decision to say, "Let's

do something that's almost 180 degrees opposite from that, because we already have that and there are these other sides of us that we haven't been able to get to."

Do you think some of that decision was a result of getting older and feeling the constraints of youth-driven or energy-driven music?

Doug: I guess it is, but as you get older, you have more experience and you get interested in more things over the course of time.

John: I think it had less to do with growing older and more to do with getting interested in change.

You guys are oftentimes viewed as being contiguous with a lot of electronic music too. What do you attribute to that? Is it your techniques for putting music together, the kinds of sounds you end up generating?

John: We use a lot of the techniques that people to attribute to being more "dance music" or something. Whether it's editing or processing, that kind of thing. People will take an element of something and magnify it because it's all they know how to latch on to.

Doug: Some people aren't familiar with the recording process, particularly recent developments—digital recording programs and stuff like that—it's a real mystery to them how you make a record on tape or a digital format. So they hear certain things and they go "Oh, this is electronic," when in reality just about everything you put on tape nowadays is electronic. An acoustic guitar or a microphone is electronic now. It's all electronic. You should hear me trying to describe to my mom how sound gets on tape. It's really funny.

What do you tell her?

[laughs] I just try and explain the basics of what I know, which isn't much. I explain the basics of tape machines and microphones how the signal gets on the tape because it's magnetic. And then she says, "So that's where you make the CDs, eh?" [laughs] I imagine that a lot of the public is

I don't care what you call us—a rock band, a piece of shit, or a diamond—it doesn't matter at all because all of those definitions fall short of music.

somewhat like that, though maybe not as bad off as my mom.

I think that's true. Look at the reception Radiohead's *Kid A* got. "It was a rock record made using a computer!" How many traditional rock records made before *Kid A* were made using programs like Pro Tools?

Doug: It'd be really fucking hard to *not* find a rock record made with Pro Tools in the last five years.

John: With Pro Tools, you can record as you would with a tape machine, or you can just do *crazy* editing. I think that's where people will make the differentiation—"Now it's an electronic record because you looped that drum part" or chopped up the vocals. But *so many* people do that. Was the fanfare because Radiohead wasn't making an R&B album? All that R&B shit has taken so much advantage of what's technologically available for *so long*.

I think it can mostly be attributed to the fact that Radiohead has a huge publicity team behind them who's able to frame what's become a rather routine task as a "revolutionary process" and then there's an entire industry that simply parrots that same concept. It's similar to the way hype formed around you guys. Except that in your case you weren't pushing the idea but because of blather-mouthed parrot rock critics. One person said "Hey, they're doing something different" and then a chorus of hacks picked up the call. How daunting is that kind of legacy?

Doug: Its funny how they can't just let you be a band. It's really unfortunate because it has gotten to the point that even a band on our level can't avoid that kind of *bullshit*. We want people to listen to our records and we want to be able to sell some records. But we don't want people jumping on our records for a reason that doesn't exist. And we don't want to have people *stop* listening to our records because "post-rock is dead." [laughs]

Did post-rock ever exist?

Doug: I don't know!

John: I read this letter to *The Wire* after our

last record came out and they did a story on the making of the new record. In the interview, we were telling the interviewer that we were just a rock band. They put a quote in there saying "blah blah blah, we're a rock band." Someone wrote a letter the next month saying, "I'm thoroughly disappointed with Tortoise for claiming that they're just a rock band. They really could have taken their music to this other place. How disappointing that they're stopping short of the goal." Obviously he had come up with what were supposed to be shooting for. I don't care what you call us—a rock band, a piece of shit, or a diamond—it doesn't matter at all because all of those definitions fall short of music. In the end who gives a shit? Who cares what you call it?

Doug: Its all tied together. The publicity machine is like this runaway train. You've got to be on top, you've got to be on top . . . You've got to go for the gusto.

Do you guys find any distinctions between how you're appreciated here versus in Europe? The British press has really been a big champion of yours.

Doug: The British press and the German press took off first, but the US came pretty close behind. I think our audiences are virtually equal in both parts of the world. It was a little smaller in the US at first.

Does the pressure of audience expectations, the publicity machine, and the press influence your creative process? Not necessarily in terms of "Now we have to make what they want," but rather "Fuck you, we're putting together a record of three minute songs and we're going to sing three minute pop songs with lyrics!" [laughs]

Doug: Yeah, but in a much more subtle way. Our goals have always been to challenge ourselves when we make a new record and try and come up with something we haven't done before. It's not always been successful, but that's what we've been trying for. We want to present people with something that will excite or surprise them—"Oh, *this* is Tortoise?" There aren't always great leaps and bounds between our

albums at all; I think it's been a much more gradual process. We hardly ever pay any attention to expectations except our own personal expectations.

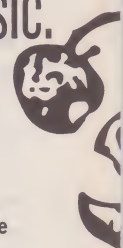
What kind of artistic future do you think the kind of music you guys are working on, both as a band and in your solo projects, has right now?

John: I don't know. I keep wondering when we're going to start selling way fewer records. I hope that there are still people that are interested in what we're doing. I'd be lying to say that I didn't want people to hear our band. I hope that for whatever reason, we can sort of sustain a core group of people that could be interested in what we are doing. I don't think we're ever going to blow up and be top 40, but I don't think we'll sort of fade away either.

Doug: I would like to think and hope that as long as we continue to make interesting music that we would have a core of people interested in hearing it. It doesn't have to be as many people as bought *Standards* or *TNT*, but I think those things go in waves. If you're committed—as I feel we are—to continue making music, which is what we love to do, both in Tortoise, and in all the other groups we're in, that we'll be presenting people with interesting music to listen to and we'll be able to sustain a career. That's my goal—to continue to challenge myself and challenge people that want to hear it.

John: I look at bands like The Ex and The Mekons and they're still doing it, keeping on because they *love* to do it for no other reason than that there's a chemistry between those people that is undeniable to themselves. That's why they keep doing it. Every career is spotty, but if you do it just for the sheer *love* of doing it, then that's success on more levels than anything.

Doug: I think that if people realize that you're in it for the long haul and you aren't just into the fashion or on some new trend—that you're *serious* about it—then you have something to offer. But it's not always easy to tell that through the cloud of publicity and hype and everything else. ©



Salim Muwakkil kicks ass. Sorry, I never finished high school, and when the blood rushes to my head, I get simple. But he does.

I discovered Salim on the op-ed page of the *Chicago Tribune*, the last place you would expect to find an ex-Black Panther and former editor of the official newspaper of the Nation of Islam. For the conservative *Tribune*, Muwakkil's weekly columns are a sort of redemption—and a miracle. The *Tribune* could have easily found a black conservative to fill the space, instead they chose a radical. In his columns, he takes on the drug war, prisons, racism, and American foreign policy with extraordinary wit and a refreshing simplicity.

Muwakkil's journalistic career began in 1972, when he was hired on as the only black correspondent for the Newark, New Jersey bureau of the Associated Press, the primary news wire service for mainstream media throughout the country. It wasn't long before he was writing much harder hitting pieces for *Muhammad Speaks*, the official paper of the Nation of Islam (of which he was a dedicated member for six years).

In 1974, Muwakkil left AP and moved to Chicago to join *Muhammad Speaks* as an editor. He stayed with the Nation after the 1975 death of Elijah Muhammad, the movement's spiritual father and authoritarian leader. *Muhammad Speaks* became *Bilalian News* and the Nation of Islam started to loosen up a bit, though dogma still confined the creativity and energies of its members.

In 1977, Salim left the Nation and began freelancing, eventually landing a regular column in the *Chicago Sun-Times*. For years he wrote about whatever he wanted, always from his own very unique, radical perspective. That relationship ended shortly after media giant Conrad Black bought up the paper and started tweaking his stuff.

Today, in addition to his weekly column and some freelancing, Muwakkil is a writer and senior editor for *In These Times* magazine, where his voice is a bit more at home.

Muwakkil spoke to me about his life and his writing from his apartment in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood.

Interview by **Jeff Guntzel**

Photo by **Daniel Sinker**

The 25th anniversary of *In These Times* is coming up. Have you been with the magazine all that time?

Damn near. I started with the magazine in 1984.

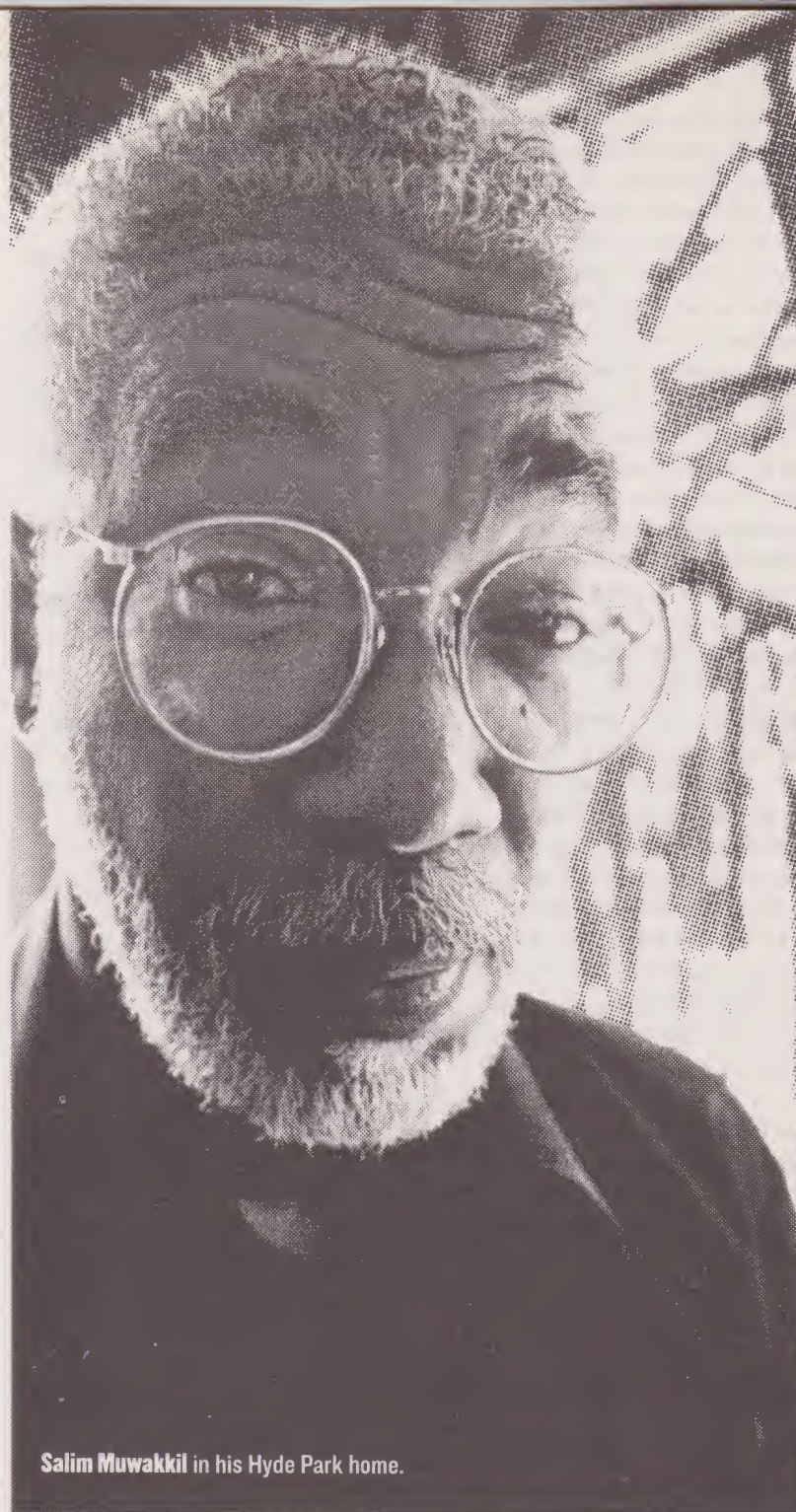
I want to talk a bit about some of the turns your life has taken. You were in the Air Force in the late '60s, during the Vietnam war. Were you turned on at all to the Black Power movement in the Air Force?

The Air Force, strangely enough, is really where I had my biggest awakening to the Black Power movement at the time. Before I was out of the service, in 1968, I got shot in Georgia by a motel manager over a minor argument that escalated because the element of race entered into it. Quite frankly, I brought it up. I was a militant in '68 and I was a little bit too demonstrative. The argument was over a room. It was a typical GI story—I had a girl and the rate of the room went up suddenly that night. I had been paying a lower price all this time, why suddenly now? I got into an argument with the man and said that he was overcharging me because I was black—at that time even the word "black" was considered the jargon of militants. He was on edge from the beginning and rather than exercise prudence, I pushed it and he shot me in my abdomen. I spent a lot of time in the hospital nursing grievances and reading the emerging black power theorists—LeRoi Jones, Franz Fanon. ¶ When I got out I was extremely angry and went straight from the airport to Panther headquarters in Jersey City. There was a very prominent Panther in Jersey and I found him to be a very articulate, eloquent, and dedicated guy and I was attracted to his cause. We opened up a store front and began to tutor elementary school students. We also had a pre-school program that we started and also a sickle

cell anemia testing regiment that we also implemented. We taught children and provided a space for them. ¶ Next to our space was an upholstery store that was a front for dealing drugs. We wanted to confront them and make them move from the area. But before we did that, we decided to consult with a Muslim who was in the area and was a well-respected member of the Nation of Islam. ¶ He invited us to the mosque to come and speak to the minister who advised us not to attack these guys, that doing so would serve the purpose of the oppressor by setting us against each other. Rather, he suggested we try to talk them out of what they were doing or try to get them to move somewhere else. He wanted us to explain our situation to them and not come at them with an aggressive demeanor. ¶ That was *very* impressive to me and I began to watch the Nation. Watching them made me begin to question what the Panthers were doing. We were angry. We were trying to take care of our own problems rather than always waiting for someone to fix them. But the way we were doing it really was immature. We didn't try to build institutions. A lot of times there was a lack of discipline—a lot of people wouldn't show up to meetings because they were too high. It seemed to me that if we were *serious* about doing something for black people we had to do something about *ourselves* first. ¶ The Nation seemed to be doing that. They weren't wasting a lot of time screaming about what white people weren't doing, they were doing

You very seldom find major news organizations going to black commentators to talk about issues that are *outside* of the black community. I think that's an injustice.

Salim Muwakkil



Salim Muwakkil in his Hyde Park home.

what *needed* to be done. We were protesting the schools and the lack of attention to African-American issues while the Nation was saying "We'll build our own schools so we can control our own curriculum." ¶ The other thing that attracted me to the Nation was domestic issues. I had a daughter out of wedlock and although I was close to her, there was something missing. I wasn't with her all the time—I wasn't doing my *job*. The Nation really stressed that. I instantly got married and set up a household. My daughters now are very successful—I can't help but think that the stability that I afforded them in that early period is a part of their success. So the Nation, much like the military did, provided the discipline that helped me ground myself at a time when a lot of chaos was going on.

How long did you stay with the Nation?

I joined in 1971 and I stayed until 1977.

How did you deal with the more extreme theological aspects of the Nation? Why did you decide to leave?

A lot of the misgivings I had, I would dismiss because of the need for black unity. I may have had quibbles, but that just meant that I didn't understand it yet. I accepted the fact that Elijah Muhammad had this extraordinary wisdom and had come up with a program that seemed to serve all of our needs. So for me to criticize that was simply residue or vestiges of my former thinking that was really wrong. ¶ Ultimately, however, I began to see how this becomes a self-perpetuating theme and how cults get people into their mindset by this kind of reductionist think-

ing and this acquiescence to authoritarian arguments. It makes sense, but if you extend it to its logical conclusion you see how it's a slippery slope. Those things had begun to bother me a bit. ¶ When Elijah Muhammad died in 1975, it seemed like there might be some changes. His son Wallace was becoming a popular figure

among the younger members of the Nation like myself. Wallace spoke on Thursdays during Elijah Muhammad's last days and would hint of a "new day" and talk about something he called "second resurrection." He was always kind of a mysterious character—he had been kicked out of the Nation several times before and he was close to

Malcolm X—and I gravitated toward him in these Thursday appearances because, as I said, I had begun having some misgivings. ¶ When Elijah Muhammad died, Wallace Muhammad came in and it seemed to me that he really did what was necessary. He eased the authoritarian nature of the Nation—he definitely took away the demonology—but when he did that I saw that a lot of the followers, although they went along with what he was saying, didn't seem to *really* go along. ¶ I stayed with the World Community of Islam, [Wallace Muhammad renamed the Nation to the World Community of Islam in 1976. In 1978, Louis Farrakhan resurrected the Nation of Islam name] and I became the editor of *Bilalian News* [which had been *Muhammad Speaks* until Elijah Muhammad's death]. With Elijah's dogma gone, I became a lot more questioning of things and I tried to make *Bilalian News* reflect that. I opened it up tremendously. We started reviewing movies and records. We tried to do some artistically experimental stuff with our covers. There were a lot of creative guys in the Nation who felt that they had been completely squashed and smothered through all these years and they were *anxious* to start doing some creative stuff. That was very, very threatening to the hierarchy. ¶ I began to hear a lot of talk about it and it forced me to begin to question the whole notion of dogma and religion. I became disaffected and I left. It was a mutual parting of the ways—the authorities had become a little bit too suspicious of my newfound libertine ideas and so they were kind of happy to see me go. ¶ The first piece I wrote after leaving in 1977 was for the *Chicago Reader*. It was called "What Color Was Christ?" and was an examination of a dispute between Christian black nationalists and Wallace Muhammad. Wallace was, at that time, instituting this campaign to get Caucasian images of the divine out of black places of worship. It was his contention that a white Christ image undermined the social and cultural esteem of the people because if they saw these revered or religious figures as being Caucasian or being white, what would they think of themselves? And the Christian black nationalists, strangely enough, were in opposition to that. I wrote about the debate. I used

this notion of what color Christ was as a framing device. Interestingly, a lot of people told me that the *Reader* would never publish my stuff.

Because you were coming from the Nation of Islam?

Right, I was coming from the Nation and because I was black. The *Reader* had this certain sensibility that not many black people had. Many black people had tried to write for the *Reader* but they were rejected. But before the *Reader* and before the Nation, my journalism talents were honed with the Associated Press.

Weren't you working for the Associated Press during your early days with the Nation?

Right, I was.

And were you also writing for *Muhammad Speaks* at that time?

Yes.

Did AP have any idea?

I didn't make it known [laughs]. I don't even think they knew I was a Muslim. My hair was short, closely cropped—I was conservative looking and these were the times of massive afros. They were desperate because they didn't have any black reporters and at that time Newark was 65 percent black. They hired me right out of college.

Did you ever wear the suit and the bow tie to work—didn't that give it away?

No. I only wore that to services and when I sold *Muhammad Speaks*. So AP took me on and I was a serious newsman. I really *loved* it. I could not have asked for a better way to be introduced to journalism.

How did the stories you were writing for AP differ from those you were writing for *Muhammad Speaks*?

Just to give you an example, there was this guy in Newark named Anthony Imperiale. He was an Italian councilmember who was really the last of a breed. He was trying to hold onto the North Ward—which was traditionally the Italian ward in Newark—against the onslaught of these black folks. Imamu Amiri Baraka, who had a group called Committee for a Unified New Ark, wanted to build a high rise called Kawaida Towers in the North Ward. So Imperiale

and the Italians were protesting this and actually got into the streets and tried to stop construction. And they *did* stop it. ¶ There was this one particular episode in which they blocked the gates and the Teamsters, who were some of their cronies, agreed not to take the bulldozers and whatnot onto the site. They all started singing "God Bless America". It was such an ironic juxtaposition that I tried to get that into the lead in the piece that I wrote for AP. They said "No, that's too complicated. Keep it straight; just talk about what happened." The resulting piece didn't resonate so I went back and I led with this devastating account of these Italian citizens of Newark belting out "God Bless America" while engaged in activities that would make most Americans ashamed. It was something along those lines. Well, *Muhammad Speaks* thought that was very well done and they took it. ¶ I began writing regularly for them. I would write a piece for AP and I would say, "Man, they're not even *getting* it." And so then I would go back and write it in a way that I thought would people really get it in *Muhammad Speaks*. Eventually I became the Newark correspondent for the paper.

Today you're writing for a very different, but still very diverse, bunch of publications.

Right, I do a weekly column for the *Chicago Tribune*. I write for *In these Times*. I do book reviews for the *Washington Post*, and occasionally I do columns for *Newsday* and the Progressive Media Project, which goes out to the *Hartford Courant*, the *Miami Herald*, the *Orlando Sentinel*, and so on.

You're all over the place. How do you choose what to write about?

It's hard to explain. I'm doing a column right now on a guy named Bakari Kitwana who wrote a book called *The Hip-Hop Generation*. It's about the kind of civil war that's going on in black America about hip-hop. A lot of people aren't aware of that. ¶ There's always been this dilemma about African-American journalists—do you ghettoize you're stuff? Too few people write about the black community and the ones who do, don't do it with that much sensitivity. Some do, but many do not. And so there is an *obligation* to write with

There are a lot of people doing good things here and there, I just wish we could get some sense of *movement*, some sense of *connection* between all of these people.

sensitivity about black America. But at the same time if you do it, it really restricts your scope. You very seldom find major news organizations going to black commentators to talk about issues that are *outside* of the black community. I think that's an injustice.

That's what amazes me about seeing you every week on the op-ed page of, which is a pretty conservative paper. How do you explain that relationship? Do you ever get flak from the paper?

I really don't get flak from them. Sometimes I just pinch myself [*laughs*]. ¶ I wrote for the *Sun-Times* from 1993-97. I was doing a weekly column on the stuff I was interested in. Then Conrad Black and the Hollinger group took over the paper and I began to notice a little tweaking of my column—a word here and there. ¶ At first they were very open to my writing. They asked me to do a piece on Farrakhan. Now, I had been pretty much a critic of Farrakhan ever since I left the Nation—a pretty *strong* critic, in fact. He had to call his troops on me at one point. They would show up and make threatening faces and that kind of thing. I made it a point to show them I wasn't intimidated, but I truly *was* because I knew these guys would do anything. I've seen stuff—residuals of the Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad feud that reverberated well into the '70s—*horrendous* stuff. I would take every opportunity to debunk certain things about the Nation. A lot of that was really injudicious because I was angry and I felt I had been used. I have mellowed since then and I think that I am now able to look at a lot of that stuff with more balance and I can see a lot of the good that Farrakhan does in the community. I just can't deny it. ¶ One of the things he was doing back then that the *Sun-Times* wanted me to write about was using the Nation to bring some order to some of the housing projects in New York. At the time, there was this congressman out of New York, King, who was angry at HUD funding Farrakhan for what the Nation was doing there. He tried to get

HUD to take away the funding. King brought up Farrakhan's connection to Khaddafi—basically equating the Nation with terrorism. So I made the point that King was a very strong supporter of Northern Ireland and so if you want to talk about terrorists, he wasn't free of them either. The *Sun-Times* really played that up. I thought "Wow, this might be a fruitful collaboration with the Hollinger Group if they're willing to go along with this." ¶ But then I wrote another piece on a street here in Chicago that was renamed Yitzak Rabin Drive. In my column, I was saying, that's truly commendable, but why don't we follow the man's advice in the Middle Eastern conflict? They didn't like that piece. It was last piece I ever wrote for them.

I've read that back when you were with the Nation of Islam, you were fond of saying, "Elijah Muhammad must be the one, because he's doing what must be done." I'm curious who do you think is "doing what must be done" today?

Man, that's a *real* good question. I don't think anyone is. I really don't. I don't see any program that is as multi-faceted as the Nation was. I no longer think Elijah was doing "what must be done," but I will admit that he was the only one bringing a holistic approach to the problem. There is *nobody* doing that today. ¶ Wallace Muhammad, I like what he's doing in many ways, but he's basically a religious man and I'm not all that fond of organized religion. Of course there are many people and small organizations who are doing great work in different areas, but there's nobody on the left who offers the sort of all-encompassing vision that the Nation, for all its flaws, or even the Black Panthers did. And to a cer-

tain extent, there's no ideological sustenance for that kind of vision, especially on the left.

But *could* there be an ideological sustenance that wouldn't be ultimately damaging or limiting?

That's difficult. I'm not a fan of ideology at this point in my life, although I realize the need for it. I would like to see an ideologically-committed movement. There are some glimmers of that in the anti-globalization movement, but even that is too diffused and confused, and an anarchist romanticism is too much a part of it. Maybe I'm too old; maybe I've passed the point where I can accept an all-explaining ideology. ¶ There are a lot of people doing good things here and there, I just wish we could get some sense of *movement*, some sense of *connection* between all of these people. There's a lot of energy out there. I *really* see it among young people, they just don't know what to do with it. And they're getting very little guidance from their elders. ¶ When Nader was running for President, I went to see him here in Chicago and it was extraordinary. There was a lot of energy, it was inter-generational, but it was like a comet that just flashed through and burned out. But it is a glimmer of hope. ©

Being a vegetarian hasn't stopped me from falling in love with Hot Doug's, a year-and-a-half old hot dog stand in Chicago's Roscoe Village.

Boasting a sausage-only menu that could make a grown man weep (this week's special: wild boar sausage), Doug Sohn's decidedly down-home storefront stays packed during its lunch-only hours.

Coming from a culinary school background, Sohn sought to make the best dog out there—but giving a nod to his punk rock roots, he made it a place that anyone could afford.

Oh yeah, he makes a mean veggie dog too.

Interview and photos by **Daniel Sinker**

So what made you decide "I'll make hot dogs"?

[laughs] There are a number of answers to that question. One, I love them—I love sausages, I love hot dogs—they're probably my favorite food. ¶ I used to be a cookbook editor working at a publishing house and a friend of mine in another department said "You know, I had a bad hot dog this weekend. How do you make a bad hot dog?" And I said, "I think you can, and I think people do." And so about every two weeks for the next two years, a group of four of us would go to a different hot dog stand in driving distance from our office. We ended up going to about 45 of them. It was a lot of hot dogs over a two-year period. [laughs] We'd go and we'd get four dogs and four fries and we'd grade the place and write a little review. The first reviews were two sentences each, but by the 25th one, they could barely fit on the page. ¶ I took it fairly seriously as far as hot dogs are concerned and at about number 33 the ideas started forming—"If I had a place, I would do *this* the way these guys do it," or "I wouldn't do it like those guys because they are totally lacking." That kind of thing led to me thinking, "Well, I could do this." That's really how it started. ¶ I never had any intention of owning a restaurant. I wanted to stay in the food business, but I had no desire to open a restaurant. As a matter of fact, that same person who had the bad hot dog—I blame him for a lot of things—about two or three months after I first opened, we were

chatting and he said "Remember when I was thinking about opening a Bar-be-que restaurant? Do you remember what you said?" I said, "not really." And he says, "You said never, ever, ever, ever, ever open your own restaurant." [laughs] I was like "Where the hell were you three months ago?!" ¶ Additionally, I wanted to do something different and get out of the office. I finally decided to take a shot at it and see how it goes.

In this city there are a lot of high-end gimmick restaurants—the place where everything's on toast, or everything's on mashed potatoes, or everything is made out of oranges. You coming from a culinary school background, it seems like the obvious choice would have been to follow those leads and open a high-end gourmet hot dog restaurant. But instead, while you're serving some stuff that isn't normally served at a hot dog stand, you have the form, pricing, and everything else of a hot dog stand.

True. That was certainly part of the original plan. I didn't want to exclude anybody. The term "gourmet" always gives me the shivers. You know what? It's a hot dog. It can be a good hot dog, but anyone should be able to afford it. I also wanted a place that you could come in and have lunch for five bucks. There aren't many places you can do that. You can't even do that at McDonalds, really. Here, you can get two dogs, a small fries and all the Coke you can drink for five dollars even. That was really important to me. Yeah, I have the game sausage and other fancier things, but I wanted to make it accessible for anybody. There is certainly a place for high-end restaurants, no doubt about it, but I didn't want to limit myself to a particular clientele. Hot dogs are the every man's food. A good hot dog is still better than a bad duck breast with cherry sauce and wild mushroom risotto.

So what made you decide to make it above and beyond a normal hot dog stand? You've got wild boar sausage on the menu right now. Last week you had rattlesnake . . .

We've done alligator, we've done ostridge, we've had kangaroo, and we've had chicken sausages of different varia-

tions . . . Because I was just serving sausages, part of having that stuff was to expand the menu. But part of it was also for the novelty of it—to make a name and make things a little different. People ask, "Do you sell any of the kangaroo?" And yes I do, as a matter of fact. [laughs] The rattlesnake sold out! It's been unbelievably popular. Some people come in here strictly for the game sausages. I've sold a lot of them. Sausage is the only thing on the menu, so I'm going to offer as many variations as possible.

Has it been what you expected?

Yes and no. I'm really happy that the concept I had and what I wanted to achieve came to fruition. If it closed tomorrow, to me it was a success—it's what I wanted to do, it works, and people seem to like it. ¶ Certainly learning what owning your own business means, that's been tough. There are a phenomenal amount of headaches; a phenomenal amount of stuff that breaks. Learning how much everything costs—every little, *tiny* thing costs money. The first six months were a phenomenal

amount of stress. **The term giv**

Having never owned my own business, I had no idea. Being in publishing before this I had dealt with deadlines, but that's *nothing*. The lack of sleep and loss of weight the first six months were unbelievable. Now it's much better, but there's still always something. It's taught me *much* more than I thought it would.

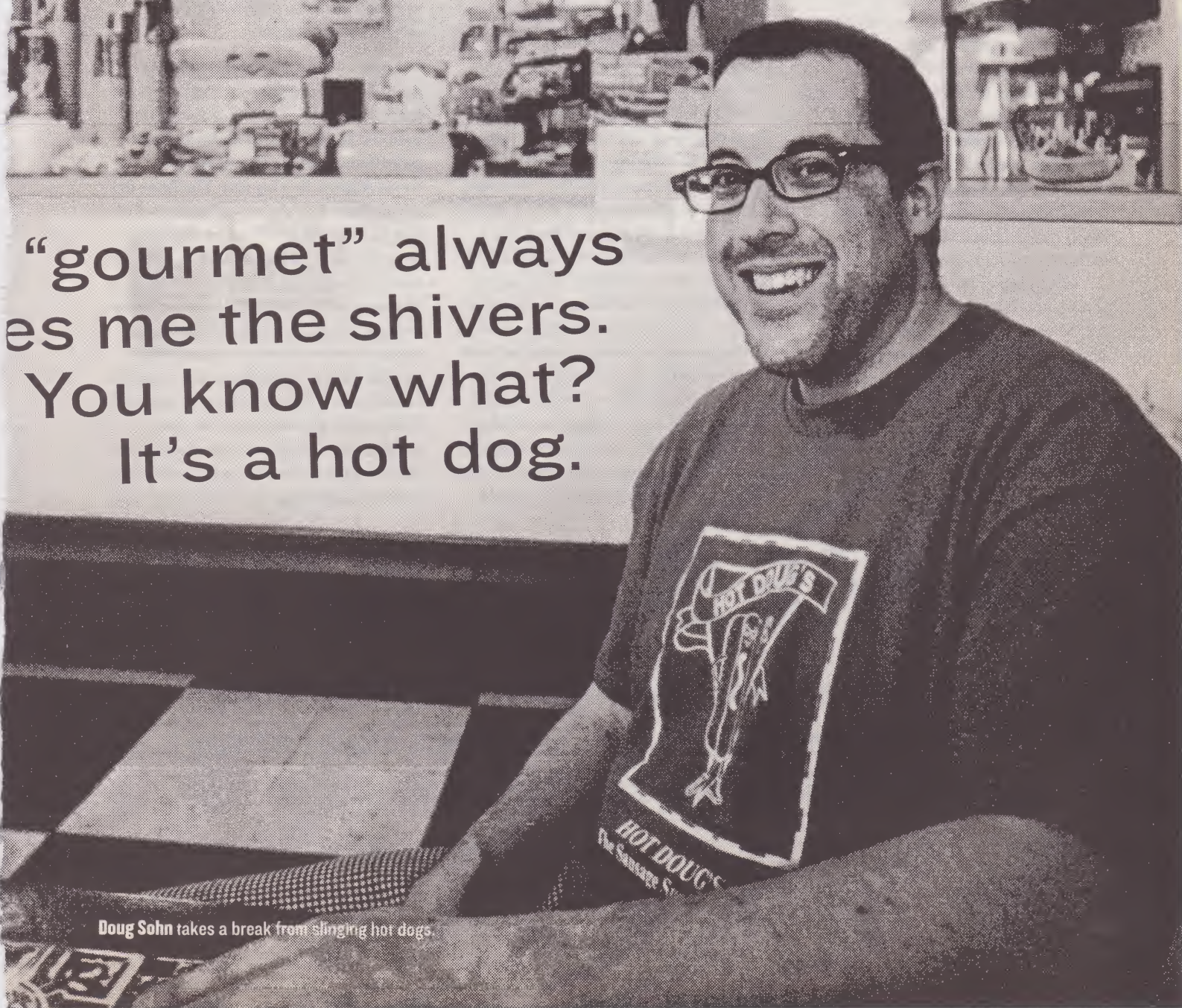
Can you see doing this for the rest of your life?

I have no idea. Five years ago, I never thought I'd be in this position. Honestly, I try not to look too far ahead at this point. I just have to see what happens next. But certainly if it works, I have no problems with that.

There are a lot shadier ways to earn a living than slinging hot dogs.

Absolutely. I have no moral qualms at all making a good, well-priced lunch for people. I have no problem with that at all. ©

A collage of hot dog-related items. In the foreground, a hot dog box is visible with the text "Hot Dog Sausage" and "Ways". To the right, a hot dog is shown. In the background, there is a hot dog stand and a sign that says "Gummy Hot Dogs". The overall theme is hot dogs.



“gourmet” always
gives me the shivers.
You know what?
It’s a hot dog.

Doug Sohn takes a break from slingin’ hot dogs.

Doug Sohn takes a break from slinging hot dogs.

Chicago is a city on the verge of losing its soul. Originally built on the concept of quality affordable housing for working people, vast tracts of the city are now being razed and replaced by ugly concrete condominium bunkers that only the precious few can afford. A working-class city (famously known at one time as the "hog butcher to the world"), entire neighborhoods in Chicago are rapidly losing their working-class roots, replaced instead by SUVs, and Starbucks.

There are organizations that are working to reverse this trend and replace it with a much broader vision. One of those groups is the Uptown-based Organization of the North East (ONE) where James Mumm works. ONE has been fighting a pitched battle in Uptown with a combination of neighborhood organizing, political strategizing, and good-old-fashioned protesting. And they've been winning victories that at one point were considered unwinnable. I'll let Mumm explain them in detail below.

The fight for affordable housing, for equal opportunity, for neighborhoods built around people instead of profit, are not new concepts nor are they unique to Chicago. The strategies that Mumm outlines below can be transported to any locality and used just as effectively. They are proven and they are successful. However, as he points out, they are not easy.

Mumm knows the difference between a good strategy and a bad one. In the early '90s, he was among a band of anarchist punks that led the charge against gentrification in Chicago's Wicker Park neighborhood, which was at the time the home to artists, musicians and much larger Latino, Ukrainian, Polish, and African-American populations. Driving down Wicker Park's streets today and seeing the high-end restaurants, aerobic kick-

boxing studios, boutiques, and condominiums, it's apparent that the battle was unconditional-ly lost. In the 10 years since, Mumm has come up with some compelling reasons why and some inspiring ideas on how to fight similar battles and win.

Interview and photos by Daniel Sinker

How did you move from punk/anarchist politics to being a housing organizer?

Housing has been critical in Chicago for a long time. It's a super-segregated city. The housing stock is *very* expensive in some places while in other neighborhoods the city and the banks have pulled back services to the point where you get things like Garfield Park, Englewood, Austin, Lawndale, West Humboldt Park. ¶ I got involved in housing issues because of work in the early '90s. I started at National Training and Information Center as a 19 year old junior staffer. I helped organizers build the leadership capacity of people from neighborhoods in Chicago by providing training, teaching, and mentoring and encouraging them to form their own organizations to take on issues that were important to them. I was active in organizing a city-wide coalition to get a program set up where the city would board up abandoned buildings in order to prevent people taking out the wiring and the plumbing. Those buildings could then be rehabbed and sold to people in the neighborhoods. We won about a million dollars in 1993 to do that. ¶ At the same time, some of the anarchist folks I was involved with were interested in squatting. We figured we'd go squat a building because in East Germany they would

take over buildings and open up bars on the first floor—we thought that was a *fantastic* idea [laughs]. There were abandoned buildings around the north side, which is where we were looking, but the north side was getting so hot that those buildings were getting snapped up—they were abandoned only for a short time or they were abandoned because of a legal battle around them. I think all the buildings that we looked at back then are all condominiums now.

It's interesting to me that you came from this anarchist background—squatting buildings and spray painting "yuppies out"—in Wicker Park, where there was such a pitched battle during that time and now you're doing this more straightforward housing work. Those are really different approaches. One was really aggressive while the other is much more about a working process.

When Around the Coyote [an annual arts festival] was getting going in Wicker Park, we *definitely* attacked it. There was direct action work—we handed out 5,000 flyers about gentrification during that weekend of events. It got to be a big deal. The *Reader* did stories about it. It got to be a big issue. But with all that work and effort we didn't construct *one unit* of affordable housing. Not *one* family or person got any cheaper housing because of all that work. No building did *not* become a condo. Nothing. We didn't stop *any* development. Number one, we didn't have the skills or knowledge of *how* to do any of that work. It takes strategy to do that, and I don't think we understood that. And number two, I'm not even sure that was the point. ¶ That was one of the things that was ultimately depressing to me and changed my

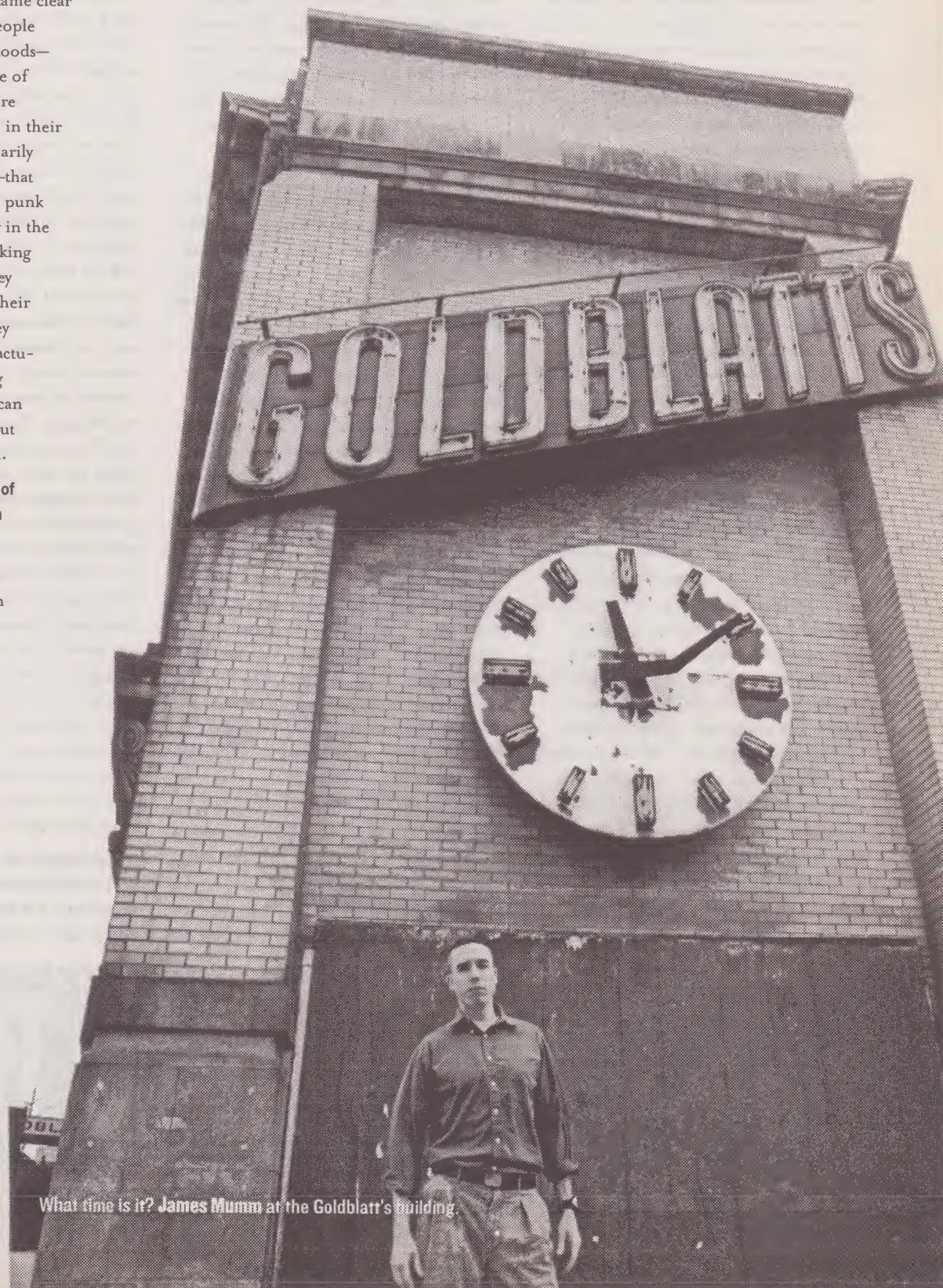
JAMES MUMM

It became clear to me as I worked with people from Chicago neighborhoods—mostly low income people of color—that those folks were equally if not *more* radical in their ideas than the kids—primarily white, middle class folks—that were in the anarchist and punk scenes.

perspective about where to organize and who to work with. Back at that time it was a mix for me—I had a job doing organizing, but I didn't think it was radical enough or revolutionary; and I had activism that *was* radical and revolutionary, but I don't think it was terribly effective. It came to a crisis for me in '96 or '97 and I had to choose where I was going to put my major life effort. ¶ It became clear to me as I worked with people from Chicago neighborhoods—mostly low income people of color—that those folks were equally if not *more* radical in their ideas than the kids—primarily white, middle class folks—that were in the anarchist and punk scenes. The people living in the neighborhoods I was working in actually believe that they have the right to govern their own neighborhoods. They really believe it and they actually want to do something about it—something you can see the visible results of but also has a long-term plan.

What are some examples of the work that you've been doing?

I think there are a couple interesting examples from up here with the Organization of the North East. We were active on a number of small campaigns to win very specific affordable



What time is it? James Mumm at the Goldblatt's building.

buildings. ¶ There was a building at 4700 north Beacon Street that a non-profit developer wanted to purchase and turn into 12 units of mixed-income housing—nine units of subsidized and three units market-rate. But they needed a loan from the state of Illinois to do so. So Organization of the North East and another group called COURAJ launched a campaign of support to tell the state of Illinois and the developer that the majority of neighborhood residents supported this plan. This was in an area of Uptown where there has been a lot of condominium development and a number of homeowners who are active against affordable housing in the area and they ran their own campaign against the whole thing. We did marches, we had the congresswoman, the state representative, the alderman, the *Tribune* . . . We showed the state and the developer that there was a great deal of support for it. And our campaign was successful. The developer was initially looking for a \$750,000 loan from the state of Illinois, but we ended upsetting them a \$1.2 million loan so they wouldn't have to go to a commercial bank. That was a couple years ago and that building has since been fixed up and families live there now. It's three or four bedroom apartments for \$400 or \$500. You don't find that stuff *anywhere* in the city. Now we have a building that will have affordable units *forever*. But it took us eight months to win nine units of subsidized housing. ¶ A more complex example of housing organizing is on neighborhood development plans. In Chicago we have Tax Increment Financing (TIF), which is a way that the city creates new money for neighborhood redevelopment. The city carves out a specific contiguous area in which the future increase in property taxes in that area will go to a special fund only to be used as a subsidy in that area for development—public development or private development—in that district. That money is mostly used for gentrifying development. For example, in

this neighborhood they want to put in a condominium development with a Borders book store at the old Goldblatts department store building. That's seen as a "good" economic development by the city. ¶ But the thing is when you put a TIF district in somewhere, you have to create a plan. That plan was, up until a couple years ago, always made behind closed doors with the department of planning and the local alderman. After struggling with seeing six TIF districts created in two and half year period up here, we organized to get public participation in these plans. We wanted the people that lived in a place—owned business, worshipped, and lived there, both homeowners and renters—to help write the plans. That way the plans wouldn't say things like "Bring in shopping centers" they would say things like "Bring in affordable housing, an El station with an elevator, a park, a library, and locally-owned businesses that provide living-wage jobs." We were unsuccessful in a couple attempts on Clark street to work with the alderman in that fashion, but we learned a lot from that. ¶ When TIF districts were proposed for the Wilson Yard—centered on Wilson and Broadway—and the Broadway/Lawrence TIF, we were able to get a *massively* different level of participation. Each of those had several neighborhood hearings in which people could come out and talk about the plan. Drafts of it were released to neighborhood groups ahead of time. And we convinced the aldermen in the 46th ward and the 48th ward to create a planning committee for the TIF, which included two to three representatives from every neighborhood group and chamber of commerce to review the plan as it went along and provide comments on the language. As a result of all this work—and more—there were some *really* detailed plans developed for both of those TIFs that hundreds and hundreds of people had provided input on. ¶ There had been a hundred TIFs in Chicago before these two and *none* of that had hap-

pened. It's a step forward. It's not the revolution, [*laughs*] but it's a major step forward in direct democracy.

But if the city proposes another TIF anywhere else in the city, that same battle has to be fought. The city hasn't opened their eyes and said "Hey this is a much better way of working this out," right?

Not in the slightest. One of the things that I think the anarchist scene or the punk scene doesn't get is that there is a political reality. It doesn't mean we have to accept it or we have to believe in reform. We can still believe in revolution, but there *are* people who control society and they have names. That needs to be understood. In Chicago, the alderman have a huge level of control, the mayor has a huge level of control, the commissioners and the staff people at city departments have control. The developers who are in there, the landowners who are in there now, the business owners, and the people who are looking to do work in that neighborhood *all* have names and corporations and whatnot. You can actually figure it out. You can look at a neighborhood and figure out who's in charge now and what their strategies are for making sure that no one else gets in charge. ¶ There is no city-wide policy on democracy in TIF districts, so you have to begin fresh in every area. Every area *does* have a mix of neighborhood groups, development corporations, and activists who can come together and change or at least influence these things. The key is to be able to understand how important that is. The short-term strategy is to make a good TIF plan, but those things are *23 years long*, and so you have to have a long-term plan to make sure that every development matches your values.

It's interesting that you mention that because in the Lawrence/Broadway TIF that you all worked so hard on is the Goldblatts development, which doesn't seem to match your values.



Right. Yeah. Freed and Associate's plan for that building is not particularly good. *Why isn't it good?* Because I think there was a real collusion between the alderman of the 48th ward and the developers to make this the one and only plan for that property. That forced neighborhood groups into a position of trying to *reform* that plan rather than try and think up a new plan until it was too late. An alternative plan did surface, but much, much too late. The plan does have *some* good aspects to it: \$1.25 million for the Leland Hotel, which is an affordable building kitty-corner behind the Goldblatts building; eight *somewhat* affordable condominiums—if you're a two income family, like two teachers, you could afford those condos. But it *also* has 30 other condos that are bad and a Borders bookstore which is bad and other commercial space which will be bad. It would have taken more effort up front by a lot of people to derail that plan. Part of it is that in an area that's gentrifying you're doing so much time just reacting. There are so many developments happening, when do you get the time to be proactive? Could a neighborhood group have put together the \$20 million plan for Goldblatts? You would have had to do *a lot* of work to be proactive enough to find a developer, develop a plan, do the whole process. Not many folks have the time or energy to do that, unfortunately. That was the critical error of the Goldblatts building. ¶ But people really learned their lesson on Goldblatts and the Wilson Yard is going to be a *much* different example. The alderman is much more conducive to this type of neighborhood planning and all the neighborhood groups and activists are united behind it. If the Goldblatts plan was 25 percent good and 75 percent bad, the Wilson Yard will be the opposite of that or better.

How did Chicago get to the point it's at now?
A point where finding an affordable apart-

ment is close to impossible in a lot of the city; where two people with modest incomes can't buy a house to save their lives?

I think the Chicago metropolitan area is almost folding back in. Chicago was built a long time ago—70 to 110 years ago. Over the course of that time you've seen white flight, the segregation and resegregation and *rere-segregation* of neighborhoods, the disinvestment—banks pulling out—in some areas. And that has been fueled by government policies that encourage housing construction. Now we're at a time where people—mostly affluent white people—want to move back to the city. Either they want to stop commuting, or their children have grown up, or they are young and affluent and want to live near culture. So the construction industry has re-concentrated on Chicago and is offering housing that is *clearly* and *crazily* unaffordable to people who *currently* live in an area. That's what we see now. ¶ But to get at the heart of it, it's that capital needs a place to go. If capital doesn't move, it's not useful anymore. There is a whole industry in America around housing construction. If it stops, a *massive* percentage of US capital stops being useful. So there's a constant process of building stuff. ¶ The Chicago city government and alderman are in favor of this kind of development and construction happening because it raises the tax base. It brings people back to the neighborhood that look like and act like the people that the aldermen are used to dealing with—the white middle class. But it's superficial because the folks that are moving back are not politically engaged—they don't move to a neighborhood because of the community. They're doing the same superimposed neighborhood thing that I was a part of when I lived in Wicker Park, except that it's Blockbuster and Starbucks instead of hip shops. They don't know the neighborhood—they don't even *see* the neighborhood. They're not engaged in it. They might not even vote.

These are people that the alderman can't even control, but they don't have to because they're benign. ¶ I have a lot of friends that can't buy houses. The Stone Soup Co-op buys houses and stuffs as many people as possible in there. [laughs] We've got 18 people in one, 12 in another, and seven in another. We've found affordable housing, but you only get a room.

So how can we reverse this trend without reverting to "fight gentrification" clichés?

I think there are concrete strategies that people can use to actually do something about housing, gentrification, and lack of democracy in Chicago or any other city. In order to create affordable housing—*permanently* affordable housing—you need to get involved in or start neighborhood groups that have as part of their vision local control of land and resources. I think you would be pleasantly surprised to find *how many* people share the exact same views as you. People that believe that yes, every building should be owned by the people that live there; all the land should be owned in common; we need more parks and less cars. Those opinions are *right* out there on the street. ¶ Additionally, we should be doing more affordable housing development ourselves. We throw away so much money ourselves on rent. It's *crazy* to do that and continue to feed the system. Joining with friends and family to purchase buildings is *key*. With Stone Soup Co-op, we've bought two buildings with assistance from the Chicago Community Loan Fund and helped them devise a way to lend money to other limited-equity housing cooperatives. But there's more beyond that: If you're in areas with a lot of vacant land, that land should be collected together under a land trust and used only for the purpose of what the people who live there think it should be used for and not let developers snap up that type of land. ¶ I think there's a real challenge out there for activists and punk kids and anarchists

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and community organizers and everybody—we need to get our hands on *massive* amounts of money [laughs] and turn that money into something good. We need capital, but we need capital that's cooperatively organized. Borrow money from credit unions or cooperative banks to purchase buildings and land, the interest and the profit from your loan gets funneled back into loans for other people for similar purposes. If you take out a commercial loan from a commercial bank, then you're just feeding money back into awful things. We need to, by any means necessary, get our hands on land and buildings and create jobs. ¶ The way to do all this is by building organizations that are directly democratic; organizations that are composed of people who are in an area and share similar values and who have an idea of how to gain enough power to make their vision a reality. It means challenging the current system to change and transform. You *live* in the current system, so it is the thing that you have to engage with.

"Development" often seems like a dirty word among anti-gentrification folks. What do you consider good development?

The type of development that capitalism supports doesn't produce physical structures that are conducive to community or democracy. Capitalism builds big brick buildings with wrought-iron fences around them with four layers of security to get in and out. That doesn't help any future democracy or community in the neighborhood. I think you need to rebuild neighborhoods. You get rid of half the streets, build a lot more parks and spaces where people get together, reduce the scales of businesses and the commuting time of people, and you localize things a great deal more.

To some degree—obviously with a certain level of modern sophistication added on—aren't you describing the original Chicago plan? The idea of green space, the idea of affordable housing, the idea of being very neighborhood-centralized with financial districts in each neighborhood. If you go out west to Portage Park or Jefferson Park or any place like that, they look like what you describe. Do you think there was something inherently bankrupt about that idea or, how

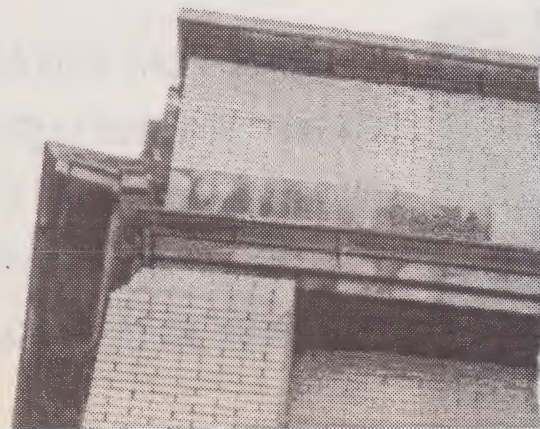
did we lose it and arrive at a point where we're fighting to get back to that?

I think that that original plan had big business and political interests guiding it. Obviously, we'd want to do something different than that—rebuild an economy based on cooperative lines, not capitalist lines. But it was also built on segregationist ideas—this was an Armenian neighborhood, that was a German neighborhood, this was a Jewish neighborhood, that was a Bohemian neighborhood, this was a Black neighborhood . . . You weren't supposed to go outside of those lines, *especially* if you were black or non-white. We'd have to shake loose the capitalism and shake loose the racism of those original visions. People's idyllic memories of community on the northwest side do not include the people who *currently* live in Chicago. I think the major drive within most people is for the irrepressible ability of humans to build community. I think the neighborhoods that you look at back then were sort of an example of that. They may not have been structured as perfectly to be community-oriented, but people did it. They had close ethnic ties, close religious ties and they lived closely with each other and developed relationships over a number of generations. People in their 50s, 60s, and 70s that we work with have those memories and want to bring them back—so they're definitely not all bad. But we need to do it in a way that isn't isolationist and protectionists.

Do it in a way that deals with modern sensibilities.

Yeah. Even the folks in the heyday of the Wicker Park late-'80s early '90s scene liked it because you couldn't walk an eighth of a block without running into somebody you knew and all the businesses you went to were owned by your friends. But the problem with it was that it was superimposed on top of a pre-existing community. It may have felt like this amazing world, but it was probably invisible to a other people who lived there for a long time and had their own sense of community. ¶ The failure of our efforts against gentrification of Wicker Park at that time is that there was no communication between the long-term residents—Polish, Ukrainian, Latino,

African-American—and the younger residents who wanted to "fight" gentrification. There was no strategy or vision of how the community could be. That might not have stopped it, but I think that would have been a more appropriate way to fight it. If someone back in '91, or even '95 had really tried to pay attention to *who* lived in Wicker Park and what their stories, self-interests, values, and relationships were, we might have had a whole different view of what happened there and what the possibilities. But that didn't happen. And that tends not to happen other places either. ¶ Few people that come out of the white middle class, or upper class, or even the white working class at times, feel like they have to build relationships with people who aren't like them. Either they don't think those people will be in favor of their idea to change the world, or they don't have faith that folks that are different than them can develop those ideas. Someone who wants better housing for themselves, or healthcare, or wants a job that pays them enough to feed their families, is not seen as radical. It's seen as reformist and something that a person who is *really* radical won't be bothered with. But I think that grassroots organizing has a lot to teach the punk and activist scenes on how to create change. ¶ You have to create a big tent with a lot of relationships and a lot of people in it. You have to have strategies that have short-term victories and long-term goals. You have to be willing to struggle with yourself and with other people. But most importantly, you have to have faith that the folks that you see on the bus are the folks that can best govern society. If you don't believe that then you should stop believing that the world can change. Because if those folks can't run society, then who are they going to be—our subjects? ©



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REASON

IS THEIR ST

The folks at Bloodshot Records never punked out on punk country—but they could have.

"There was a time a couple of years ago when major labels thought this kind of music would be 'the next big thing,'" says label co-owner Nan Warshaw. "That's when Bloodshot was getting all these buy-out offers from majors, which was a little flattering, but also really stupid. The idea that this could be a money making genre—it all collapsed or imploded on people. But, hey, we're still here."

Founded in 1993 by Warshaw and fellow Chicago barfly Rob Miller, Bloodshot became ground zero for midwestern bands that were—pardon the phrase—a little bit country and a little bit rock 'n' roll. Some folks called it "alternative country"—or "insurgent country", "punk country", "americana", "y'alternative" and about three million other handles that never seemed like the right fit—and, to a whole lot of major label creeps with ponytails and cell phones, it really *did* sound like the next big thing. Artists like Gillian Welch, Blue Mountain, and Whiskeytown came out of nowhere to sign on the dotted line. Soon everyone had stars in their eyes.

Even early Bloodshot signees like Robbie Fulks, Old 97s and the Bottle Rockets left the label for a trip down the mainstream. Within a

few years, though, nearly every single one of them would come crawling back.

When they returned, Bloodshot had grown considerably. No longer was it some silly idea that Warshaw and Miller had drawn up on a cocktail napkin. Bloodshot had quickly become an indie institution—a place where these musicians could record roots-reflective records without the ponytails and the cell phones. "We'll never say to an artist, 'Hey, this album doesn't really have a hit,'" Miller chuckles. "That's why people like being here—they can do whatever the hell they want!"

So how did a label that started in a small punk rock bar become so damn appealing? This past spring, I sat down with both Warshaw and Miller to get the straight story.

Interviews by **Trevor Kelley**

Photos by **Michael Coleman**



Nan Warshaw and Rob Miller outside Bloodshot's Irving Park office.

PART ONE: NAN WARSHAW

When did you know there was this thing happening—alternative country or insurgent country or whatever you want to call it—that needed documenting?

Around 1993. I don't think I was aware of anything nationally. At the time, I knew that there were these bands playing around in Chicago that had a thread of old school country running through their music. Yet they were underground rock bands, playing in all of these small clubs. I was DJing a country night at a punk rock bar in Chicago and there were a number of bands and people hanging out. So, of course, I would go and see their bands

when they played around Chicago. Weren't you doing this country night with Al Jourgenson from Ministry?

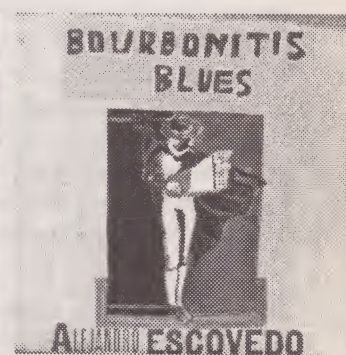
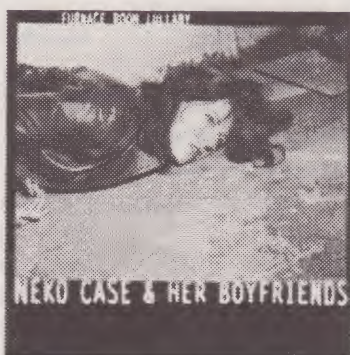
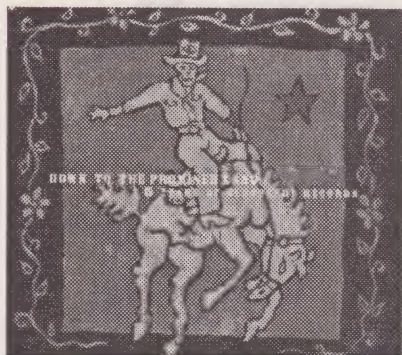
Yeah, Al was friends with the owner, so he'd always be hanging out there. I was guest DJing my country night and Al came in and said, "This is great, you should do this every week!" And I said, "Well, the owner doesn't really like country music, he only lets me do this because he knows some of his regulars think it's fun . . . but I bet if you tell him we should do it, he'll listen." So Al and I alternated Wednesday nights for a couple of years.

That's pretty indicative of how country music was viewed at the time. As Rob has said, country was still the "C-word" back then.

It was a really tough sell for, like, four years. It's still hard. There were some college radio stations that I would call up and I would say the word "country" and they would tell us, "We don't play country music, sorry." It was that simple. It took a lot of time for people to realize that this had less to do with commercial country radio and more to do with punk rock—at least in attitude.

Were you ever afraid you were going to pigeonhole yourself by calling Bloodshot a country label? Especially since so many people had certain biases against country music?

Yes and no. We were concerned by it, but that's why we called it "insurgent country." There are tons of labels that have done cool things, even though they started out



PART ONE: NAN WARSHAW

IT TOOK A LOT OF TIME FOR PEOPLE TO REALIZE THAT THIS HAD LESS TO DO WITH COMMERCIAL COUNTRY RADIO AND MORE TO DO WITH PUNK ROCK—AT LEAST IN ATTITUDE.



around a pretty narrow sound. Look at Touch and Go or Sub Pop or Am Rep—or even Stax, if you want to go back further. All those labels had a real identifiable sound—but that sound helped establish them as independent labels. Once they were established they could broaden their scope. We were hoping that it would go in that direction, as opposed to steering us into the alternative country ghetto.

How did the label actually come together?

Rob was just hanging out at the bar I was DJing at and he was making a lot of requests. Soon enough we started making a list of all the bands we knew and liked that were doing this sort of thing—and there were 20 bands just in town! So we thought, “Why not put together a compilation of all of this stuff?” And that was our first release: *For A Life Of Sin*. Once the *For A Life Of Sin* compilation had been out for a couple of months and copies started seeping into different parts of the country, we started getting letters and calls from bands in other places that said, “Hey, we have a scene like this in our town, too!”

When that was going on, though, it must have seemed like an incredibly small movement.

Absolutely. We were just providing a snapshot of the underground rock scene in Chicago. At the time, these bands didn't even know each other existed. We never really thought there was this big scene that we should dedicate a label to. It was more like the other way around. We put out a compilation and loved some of the bands on that first comp, so we put out their first releases as well. Then we did another compilation, *Hell-Bent*, and even then we were just doing it for the love of it. We never thought we'd make a record label out of this. It was just what was moving us at the time.

Unlike, I don't know, your run of the mill pop-punk label, there wasn't a national network to support this. It was all so new. Nothing was established. Did that ever frighten you?

Yeah, we really had no idea if we were going to lose our shirts or not. We put in \$2,000 each and went from there. It was—

n't until years later that we had to reinvest. We didn't even pay for our first few recordings: the bands actually donated them. No one was making any money. We just did it to put it out there.

When did you know you made it?

I don't know. Maybe four years ago? That was when we hired our first real paid employee. We hired her as a publicist even though, at the time, we hadn't paid ourselves back. But we knew we had to do something. We were growing too fast, so we made the decision to offer someone a full time job. It was at a slave wage, but it was still another person! [laughs] At that point I knew if things didn't work out, we'd have to go back to being a scaled-down fan-run venture. But it worked out. That's when I started to think, “Hey, maybe I can actually make a living off of what I love?” It's absurd that we can do this. It's just outrageous. But it's so awesome that we can help some of these artists make a living off of their music. Obviously, it's something I never expected to do . . . but it's wonderful all the same! ©

PART TWO: ROB MILLER

Kelly Hogan, who is an artist on the label, once said that Bloodshot isn't just a record label, it's sort of a cause. Would you say that's accurate?

Yeah, I think it is. We definitely have an agenda. We definitely have a very strong label identity. We've definitely turned down bands that we love because they didn't fit into our focus. I guess our cause is getting good music out there.

For a while there, the majors were snatching up nearly every single band in this genre. Did that make it more difficult for you, an indie label that specialized in it?

Yeah, when the Old 97s and the Bottle Rockets and Whiskeytown were all getting signed by majors, that was a hard time for us. A lot of bands that we wanted to work with were sitting on their hands because they were waiting for a major label deal. At the same time, though, a lot of our bands had been through the major label wringer.

The Waco Brothers and Alejandro Escovedo wanted to work with us because they knew it was all a dog and pony show. I think the majors have a more realistic appraisal of this kind of music now. In 1995 or 1996, there were A&R guys looking for the next big thing. I think their collective will was for these bands to be the next big hit so that they could make their Christmas bonuses. But it never happened.

Did you ever fear you were aiding and abetting the idea that this could be a marketable genre? I'm sure there were some A&R guys that thought, “Gee, alternative country must be the next big thing—there's even a record label for it!”

Not so much, it was more eerie. When we came along and helped define this music—as much as some people give us credit for—then people were allowed to make their music and have a means to get it out there and get the attention of the media. But it was weird that the majors were gearing the country up for this to be the next big thing. We were watching them spend enormous amounts of money on mediocre bands. It was really annoying to have all of these people we wanted to work with being distracted by a guy flying in from out of town saying, “Hey, I like Hank Williams too!”

This, as you know, is from the website: “Help us keep our steel-toed work boots firmly on the throats of the enemy.” First off, that's pretty intense. [laughs] But, secondly, I don't think most people—especially people reading Punk Planet—would expect to hear such staunchly independent sentiments from the owner of a label like Bloodshot. Where do those ideals come from?

The more you learn about the music industry, the more repellent it becomes. It's not a meritocracy. Most of the stuff you see in the major media is not interesting. It's not representative of what's going on at a grassroots level. For me, when I was a teenager and I went and saw Black Flag, I saw a band up there connecting with the audience. That, to me, is what I enjoy about music. I've never enjoyed watching big products. There's no connection there. First and foremost, we're music fans here. We go to

these shows because we want to. I would see these bands even if they weren't on the label.

Well, for me, the thing that's been a bummer about this style of music is that it has always been synonymous with major labels. All the big alternative country bands were on majors. There's never been a huge interest, it seems, in doing this independently.

I would obviously disagree with that statement when it comes to our artists, but as far as the alternative country community as a whole? I haven't the faintest idea! [laughs] Some of these artists, like Lucinda Williams or Ryan Adams, are being groomed for some sort of major label acceptance in our culture. I can't personally blame an artist for doing it, if it's done under the right circumstances, but

it's often not. It breaks my heart. When I listen to those last few Old 97s records or even Ryan's new record, I can just hear all the people in the studio telling them to turn up this or compress that so that radio will play it. When Ryan did his record with us, it was all 16 track and it was done in a couple of weeks.

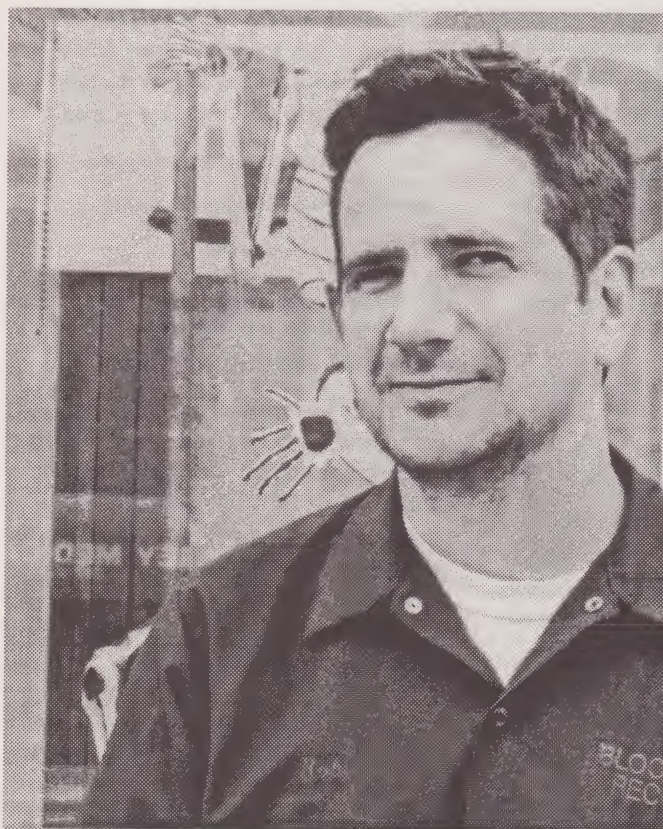
Do you see yourself providing an alternative?

I hope so. There are people here making a living off of their music and we never expected that. If you're happy making a living selling 20,000 records or 30,000 records, then fine. That's the equivalent of selling a couple hundred thousand on a major, when you consider how much money ends up in the artist's pocket at the end of the day. I'm just happy providing an outlet for people who have, for a long

time, been heroes of mine.

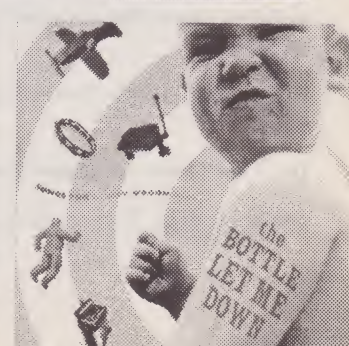
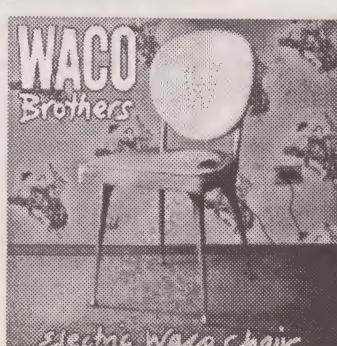
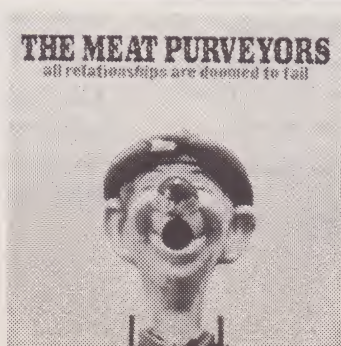
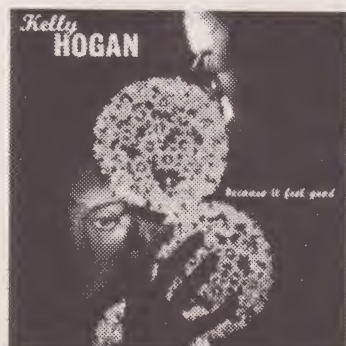
Do you ever feel like you've sidestepped success because of that outlook?

Absolutely! We are *not* business people. The list of stupid business decisions we've made is endless. We've done lots of dumb things because we love our bands. A lot of our bands know that they have no chance of selling more than a thousand records. But we love these bands and we can't help ourselves. I can't live with myself if I do something that's unethical. I can't, with a clear conscious, paint a smile on my face and say, "Yeah, let's do this deal!" I'd rather do it ourselves . . . even if we fuck it up! [laughs] At least I'll be able to look back at our track record, listen to these records, and be proud of what we've done. ©



PART TWO: ROB MILLER

THE MORE YOU LEARN ABOUT THE MUSIC INDUSTRY, THE MORE REPELLENT IT BECOMES. IT'S NOT A MERITOCRACY. MOST OF THE STUFF YOU SEE IN THE MAJOR MEDIA IS NOT INTERESTING. IT'S NOT REPRESENTATIVE OF WHAT'S GOING ON AT A GRASSROOTS LEVEL... I'VE NEVER ENJOYED WATCHING BIG PRODUCTS.



Forget rock writers who'll tell you the Dishes sound like the Slits or Wire—these three girls and a guy bang out rangy, revved-up rock 'n' roll that runs much hotter than you'd figure chilly Chicago could handle.

So what if drummer Mike Tsoulos is the only city native (with guitarist and singer Sarah Staskauskas moving all the way from Rockford, Illinois—"Home of Cheap Trick!" she cheerfully adds)? The Dishes are dug in deep: former comic-shop clerk and bassist Sharon Maloy's done design work for acts local and not-so-local and guitarist Kiki Yablon just stepped up from Music Editor at alternative weekly the *Chicago Reader*—a spot with an unparalleled view of the city's music scene—to Managing Editor, a spot with an unparalleled view of the whole city.

But real-world careers—and in Sarah's case, motherhood, too—haven't sapped any of their snarl: the first guitar riff Kiki learned was a Rocket from the Crypt song; they're listening to AC/DC and the Shangri-Las in the tour van; and National Public Radio even commissioned them for a guitar-heavy cover of the nanny song from *Mary Poppins*. With a little finesse and a lot of fuzz, it all resolves into the raw garage-rock growl of 1-2, the latest in a streak of Dishes releases on Yablon's own label, No. 89 Records (Kiki's dad was a race-car driver and that was the number on his car, Sarah says).

On the album, you'll get to hear songs like "Fishnets," "Girls Can't Play," and "Pink Stucco Bungalow"; in person, you'll get to hear the Dishes go after music critics, their undeserved reputation as hard drinkers, and the ways you make a rock 'n' roll band work when you're hovering around 30. Oh, and you'll probably get Sarah talking about pussy, too.

Interview by **Chris Ziegler**

Photos by Calbee for Snapcult

You don't seem to have a typical Chicago sound—it sounds like you should be from LA or Texas.

Sarah: Well, what is the Chicago sound to you?

Um, I don't know . . . Charles Bronson?

Sarah: We didn't have anything particular

in mind that way. I think we sound like a Chicago band because we're from Chicago.

Sharon: We didn't start playing music because we were part of some scene where everybody was doing it. I mean, *everything* comes through here . . .

Kiki: Most of my best friends in bands here are people who do totally different stuff.

So how do you fit in?

Sarah: Like a glove, in our own world.

How so?

Sharon: I'm pretty comfortable playing the music we're playing—stuff like the Nerves and the Gaza Strippers are, too—loud rock music.

Kiki: There's actually a really active garage scene here that we sort of overlap with a little bit—not exactly right in there with the more prominent of those bands, but we all smile and say "hi" and see each other at each others' shows or whatever. And somebody was joking a few months ago that we're the rock band that all the post-rock bands love. I think that has more to do with who our friends were before we started playing.

How does Chicago show up in the music you're playing?

Kiki: It affects more our ability to *do* music than our music directly. The environment for putting out records in Chicago is really great. I mean, No. 89 Records is just me, but I've had a lot of help from people at Touch & Go, Thrill Jockey, Aesthetics and other artists in town—like Damon Locks did our artwork for us in exchange for Sharon helping him lay out the Total Sound Group Direct Action Committee and the Eternals 12" . . . stuff like that. There are at least four major independent distributors here—on our first record, nobody outside of Chicago knew who we were, because we hadn't been anywhere yet, but all those local distributors took the record.

So it's a question of resources and accessibility?

Kiki: Yeah, but what Sharon was saying

was a good point too: Everything comes through here. And there's also a lot of musicians here.

It seems like there has been a lot made in the press about there being three girls up front in the band. What questions about "women in rock" are the rock writers asking? Anything you're tired of hearing?

Kiki: It is sort of a pet peeve of mine when somebody's like, "and some dude on drums."

Sorry, Mike.

Mike: [*sadly*] Yeah.

Kiki: And we've gotten that a couple times, and it always seems really offensive to me—I mean, the drummer's really the most important person in the band. Like how good we are really fluctuates with who's playing drums—the drummer's the only one who can't make a really big mistake.

Mike: Every time I do, I get slapped.

So they got you trained pretty well?

Mike: Yeah, pretty well.

Kiki, since you're a music editor in your day job, what's it like watching the critics and writers from the band side of things?

Kiki: It's pretty funny. I can't tell you how many critics have told me, "Well, I'm a critic, not a reporter," which somehow *absolves* them of actually making a line between fact and opinion and making sure the fact part is right. There's been a few things lately that say we drink a lot and smoke pot . . .

So your bad girl rep is undeserved?

Kiki: Well, Sarah tripped and fell off the stage in Indianapolis, and then later on a message board, somebody's like, "I don't like to watch bands when they're wasted!"

Sarah: He didn't notice the coffee cups and Coke cans everywhere!

Kiki: Yeah, we were just drinking coffee before the show. We were tired because it was the last night of tour. I mean, we do drink, but we don't play 'drunk.'

"Does anyone here want to kiss my ass?"

the **DISHES**

The Dishes get their fill at The Hideout.

Sarah: I just had heels on!

So why do you think you get this? Why the reputation?

Sarah: We just *exude* liquor. We look like tough-drinking broads.

Mike: Sit in a van for a week and *you'll* look like you've been drinking too!

Kiki: I think it's because people project a lot of themselves into music writing—which in the most classic music writing can be really great, like Richard Meltzer—but it's also a total hack device. People hear the music, and it makes them feel like going out to a bar and drinkin' and dancin', so then they project that on the bands. I can't tell you how many times I've had to cut stuff [at the *Reader*] like, "This is a 'heroin' band!" and there's absolutely no evidence anyone in the band does heroin.

So you're just an "alcohol" band now?

Kiki: Unfortunately.

Don't worry, we're dispelling that myth right now. We'll tell 'em you're just a Coke-and-coffee band.

Sarah: Don't say "coke" unless you say "Coca-Cola."

Kiki, if you weren't in the Dishes, what would be the story you'd write about them? I'm trying to get you to do my work for me.

Kiki: Well, I wrote the press kit. I tend to be pretty interested in music biz stuff—and I'm pretty impressed with us for doing most of this stuff on our own. I'm actually not averse to being asked about the "girl" thing—but being *asked* and when people make *assumptions* is two different things. And you know, you probably don't have this problem out where you live, but I have problems finding people who want to write about rock.

What! Why?

Kiki: Well, rock is like a non-verbal form. I don't respond to most of my favorite records verbally—you either like it and it makes you wanna dance or . . . Sarah's kid is here so I can't say what else . . . You sort of have a *physical* reaction to it. That's kind of why we put the lyrics in the record this time.

Sharon: Also getting back to the Chicago-specific thing: Having such a big post-rock scene—which in a lot of cases can be said to be sort of intellectual—people come here for that and are interested in that, but it doesn't mean that those same people don't like rock 'n' roll. But there's a lot more *talking* when it comes to other forms—rock 'n' roll sort of gets left out a bit.

So it's not exactly like people look down on it, but if you drag out a laptop instead of a guitar, you're going to be taken more seriously as an artist.

Kiki: It's funny—my, um, spousal equivalent is in a post rock band and is constantly amazed by the things people project onto them, like intentions that they never had. I mean they pretty much just do stuff that they think sounds good, and then people lay all this shit on it. It's like, "Does it mean you're intellectual if you like Kraftwerk?"

Sharon: And also there's a lot of people who come to our shows that are like, "Wow! Rock 'n' roll! Sounds so good!" And those are people who are involved in other kinds of music, but they enjoy seeing us play because they're not inundated with tons of rock all the time, so it's refreshing.

Kiki: I also think Sarah's lyrics are pretty smart.

Kiki, does the critic half of your brain ever get in a fight with the guitar playing part?

Kiki: Yeah, that's why I drink heavily! Well, you know, sometimes—I mean, we had this song, "Girls Can't Play," and I was like, "People are going to be all over that." But that's what the song is.

How about the song "Fishnets"? It asks, "Do you need sex to be sexy?"

Sarah: No, but it helps!

You don't seem to be a band that's shy about talking about sex. Why?

Sarah: I'm just not too terribly embarrassed by sex, feeling sexy, being a woman. So no, I don't shy away from it. And I don't mind saying "pussy" ever. Occasionally when I'm out on stage, with no context at all! "Pussy!"

Ever said anything that made the whole band just stop and stare?

Sarah: So many times . . .

Sharon: "You can smell my pussy from over there!"

Sarah: Or when I said, "Does anyone here want to kiss my ass?" And then I pulled down my pants and this guy actually came up and kissed it. It was amazing!

Kiki: And then he wanted someone to kiss his butt, and the audience declined.

Sharon: An audience member told me about this, like a year later—we were about to start playing and Sarah looks out and says, "Our pussies smell like hell and high water!"

Kiki: I was like, "Speak for yourself!"

Sarah: I don't remember saying that, but it's possible. Some people seem to take offense, but too bad.

Kiki: The best thing Sarah ever said—we'd just played after this friends' band of ours, that does ZZ Top covers—we get on stage and Sarah goes, "Well, we don't know any ZZ Top, but we got a lot of beard up here, if you know what I mean!" And everyone's like, "What? You got a lot of beer?"

Where's that come from? Were you raised in a pussy-positive environment?

Sarah: Aw, geez, I *never* heard that growing up! I don't remember my dad being crass or anything, but later—like in the last five years—I realized where I get this from. He wouldn't say it to me, but at a party or in a group, he'll say things and it'll just completely *floor* me. And then my mom said "snatch" one day, and I'm like, "Oh my God, this is where I get this from!"

So are you keeping an eye on your own kid?

Sarah: Oh, he's gonna be *baaad*!

What's he think of the band? Do you bring him to shows?

Sarah: We brought him to one show, and him and his friend sold T-shirts. They had this tactic: when people would walk by, they would say out loud, "We haven't sold a *thing*!" And then someone would buy a CD.

The last Chicago band I talked to was Milemarker and we had a whole conversation

about their 'Sex Jams.' How do you think the Dishes talk about sex?

Kiki: I don't think our lyrics are explicitly political, which kind of goes back to the whole thing about intellectual rock 'n' roll. I love Gang of Four, but whatever they're saying would be fine with me—I don't love them because they're political. And I kind of don't like really explicit, real literal lyrics—I like stuff that puts an image in your head, but it might put a different image in someone else's head, like poetry!

Sharon: And Sarah's lyrics have a sense of fun about sex. They're not too heavy, but they're not too dreamy either.

How do people respond to the "pussy talk"? Does it freak them out?

Sarah: I hope it freaks them out. But I also hope that they can get past the female thing. That's what this is all about, it's about us playing rock 'n' roll, trying to write good songs, hopefully so people aren't just coming to see three girls standing up in front of them pulling their pants down.

Sharon: For the record, Sarah's the only one who's ever pulled her pants down.

Sarah: And I've only done it once.

Mike: Well, I did too, but not while we were playing.

Kiki: Well, you know, on stage, I don't particularly wanna see a guy pull his pants down, unless he's wearing eyeliner.

Sarah: I was never into the whole Red Hot Chili Pepper thing—that kinda grossed me out.

Didn't L7—I think—say they're not trying to be a great "girl rock" band, they're trying to be a great rock band? Is that what you mean?

Sarah: Yes. I've also said the same thing, without quoting them. This guy came up to me at a show and was like, "That was really great rock 'n' roll, and it wasn't because you're women—you guys played a really great show." That means a lot.

Sharon: I always feel dumb when that question comes up. It's like, "Do I have to say this aloud, that we wanna be a great rock band and not just a good girl group?" It seems like we shouldn't have to say that aloud anymore.

Kiki: Like *whose* aspiration is it to be the best girl rock band?

Sarah: I mean, I don't have an aspiration to be the *best* rock band either. But I am female and I love fashion and I love to be looked at, and that's why I'm on stage, too! Don't forget that!

Well, you know, on stage, I don't particularly wanna see a guy pull his pants down, unless he's wearing eyeliner.

Kiki: Just like Mick Jagger!

How do you think things have changed in the last 10 years or so, since Riot Girl sort of dropped off the public radar? Are there questions you're still not being asked or attitudes still persisting?

Sarah: Are you asking because there's not a specific genre of girl music?

No, it just seems that to the mainstream media, when Riot Girl "went away," it was like, "Problem solved! Not an issue!" But where do you think we're really at?

Kiki: Sexism—and not just in music—is all sort of underground now, unless you're part of the Christian right. That actually makes it harder to combat—no one will come out and say something that you can completely slam them on, like, "You shouldn't be playing music—you should be having babies!" I think the Riot Girl thing was helpful, but at this point, there's no reason that if a girl wants to go out and start a band, that she can't. I don't think there's anything in the way.

Sarah: But I don't think there's *ever* been anything in the way, except intimidation.

Kiki: Which is a big thing.

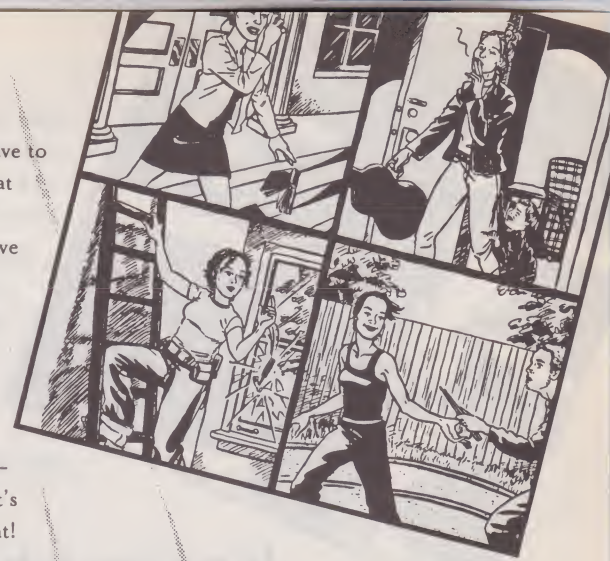
Sharon: And I keep thinking about our

conversation a couple minutes ago about pussy talk, about pulling our pants down on stage, and then about Riot Girl and sexism . . . There's something about Riot Girl that's overtly political, but in many cases not very sexual. Like not flaunting sex, like not wanting to be mistaken for something superficial. And I'm feeling a little self-conscious—like, "Oh, we pull our pants down and say 'pussy' all the time"—that's not how we always are. There's no script—it's just always different. Sometimes it's raunchy if the crowd is playful; sometimes it's totally straightforward.

Sarah: And it is all in fun—the whole "pussy talk," it's not a serious thing. It's not what we're all about, but it does come up from time to time.

Sharon: We're not afraid to do it in the right context, but there's sort of a mutual wink and nudge to the audience—if the audience seems aggressive, it might not be something we put out.

Kiki: I'm trying to think of a way to put this that doesn't sound too negative . . . We're kind of an inconsistent live show, because we really feed off the audience. I don't mean like we're bad, I mean our interaction with the crowd, how we talk to





Kiki: . . . and the whole back of the room collapsed and there's still these two girls up front, who didn't know, rocking out like, "Yay!"

Sarah: My favorite rock experience was in DC where I tripped, flew over the monitor, caught myself, ran out into the crowd, and my cord pulled out of my amp, right as the song ended!

Did you take a bow afterwards?

Mike being awesome and reliable, even though he's in two other bands and works a lot. I don't even question that we'll have band practice however many times a week.

Sarah: Mike and I both bartend, so it's easy to get off work . . .

Kiki: . . . except you don't get paid when you're gone, so that's like a hardship you have to endure.

How are you able to make a touring band

It's nice when the front row is co-ed, women and men and not just one or the other, although that's not a necessary prerequisite.

the crowd influences us—it's not like Nashville Pussy where every single night the bass player's gonna blow fire.

So what makes a good crowd? What's the magic?

Sarah: Well, when there are people there at all, it helps.

Kiki: If they're paying attention and there's a lot of energy in the room, you can feel it; feed off of it.

Sarah: It's nice when the front row is co-ed, women and men and not just one or the other, although that's not a necessary prerequisite.

Sharon: We're much more likely to wanna be more down and dirty, like at a party, talking to the crowd and all.

What's the most rock 'n' roll thing that ever happened to you guys?

Sharon: The bar room brawl in Cleveland—it doesn't have anything to do with us, so we can't really claim it. But there were a bunch of people, a bunch of girls right up front rocking out, and there's a really low stage, a really intimate room, and we're playing and a fight breaks out! And all of a sudden there's all these people rolling . . .

Sarah: . . . a big pile of people . . .

Sarah: I threw my arms up in the air!

Something else I wanted to ask: I was wondering what the age spread is in the band?

Sarah: We're all in our 30s.

I know so many people that are getting to that age and pulling back from music. What's made it possible—both practically and philosophically—for you to stay so involved in music?

Kiki: The *Reader's* been actually really nice about it—Sharon and I have both been at our current jobs for like five years. I've found that contrary to the usual way of doing things where you get a totally disposable job where they don't care if you leave, instead you get a job where they come to *really* need you. Also I think what passes for our families—boyfriends or what not—have been super-supportive. Mine runs errands for me during the day—he goes and picks up records and takes stuff to the post office.

Sharon: If I wasn't in the Dishes, I don't know how involved I would be, but in a way, it's like I'm on Team Dishes. I've been doing this for a while and I feel more committed to this than any other band just because it's got more in it: Kiki's amazing effort on the business side; Sarah being super prolific; and

work, with so many commitments—jobs, families, kids, all that?

Kiki: You just have it in you. This is one of the things I *want* to actually do.

Sarah: I think also the music creates the energy to have the ability and motivation to take off work, find babysitters, find ways to go on tour . . .

Kiki: . . . stay up 'til two in the morning every work night or whatever.

How's the economics? How does running a band affect your lives?

Kiki: If we were on one of a handful of larger independent labels, we might do better financially, but I think we're sort of better off how we are now. We made a profit on our first record that went into recording our second one. Our expenses and our incomes—not including record sales—are more or less equal.

So what makes you stay in Chicago? What's the magic that makes you stick around?

Sarah: You must have never been here—it's wonderful!

Mike: It's got pretty much everything to offer—bitter cold, hot summer, and a lot of good music comes through here.

Do you still have that river that catches fire?

Sarah: No, that was a lake in Cleveland! ©



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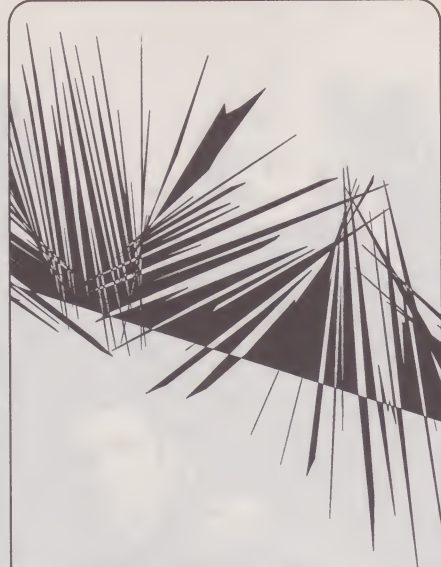
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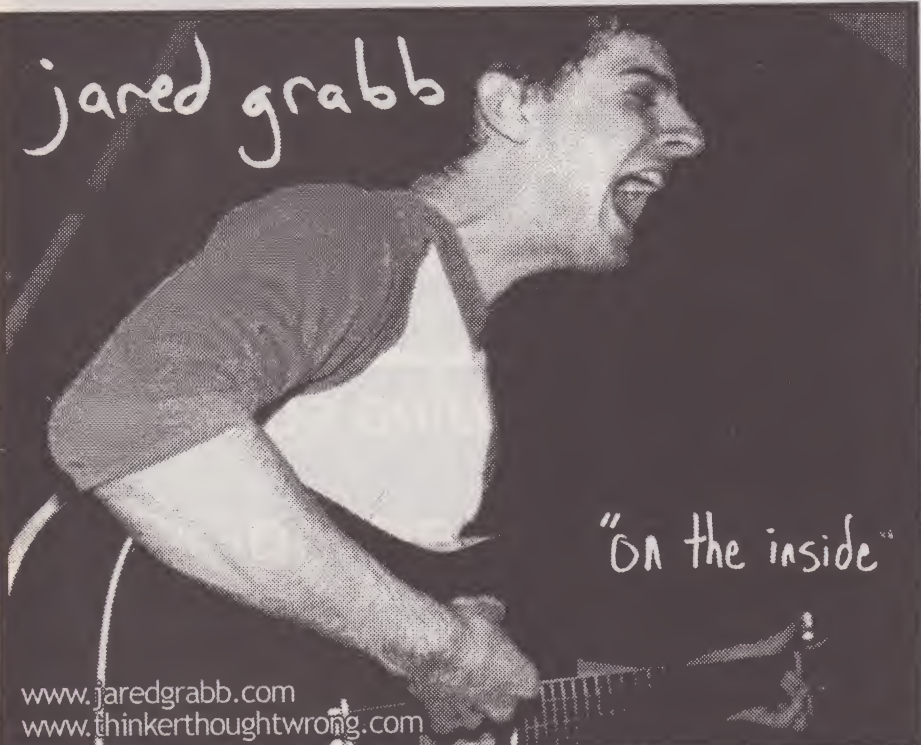
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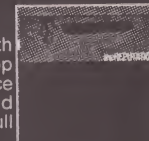
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Escape

by Alex Singerman

The alarm beeped.

The drone forced me awake.

I switched it off, turned on my bedside light and viewed my room through the slits of my eyes. When I peeled off my dirty covers, it seemed like my body had a grudge against me. It probably did. It sure felt angry.

I filled the sink with ice-cold water and dunked my head in, twice. I picked up the paper and carried it into the kitchen, also carrying a vicious hangover. As I cracked open a beer, I skimmed across the front page. When the bottle was empty, I stopped reading.

I had to dress. On came my shirt, trousers, then my tie. I tied my shoes and left for the train. It came two minutes late and I stepped on. I watched the people, some I recognised, others I didn't. Still, we were all united by our desire to be back in bed. Or at least somewhere else, anywhere else. Just not on the way to work. I needed a drink.

When I was at school, my teacher once told the class about the time when he was on a train and somebody jumped under it. Suicide. I was fascinated by the event and the casual way he spoke of it. He mentioned something about "the smell of burning human flesh." Now I was a teacher and I wanted to be under a train. Anywhere else, I thought.

I started my walk and, as I drew closer, the school loomed over me. It was a cold, colossal building; a school for over-

privileged imbeciles, all safe in the knowledge that, no matter what, there would always be a job waiting for them at Daddy's company. They didn't need me and I most certainly didn't want them to. I didn't become a teacher because of any benevolent notions of helping educate the youth of today or spreading my intelligence and wisdom. I just needed a wage to pay for booze.

This was my fourth teaching job. I was fired from the first two as a result of my drinking and I left the third when I knew I wasn't wanted. I was safe at job number four. The head of the school was a "recovering alcoholic" who hadn't touched alcohol in years. Although many former drunks develop a hatred for those too weak to jump on the wagon, the Head did not. He always treated me with understanding and leniency, giving me a sense of job security.

I stepped into the school, walked down the corridor, opened the door and entered the staff room. I was hit by the strong smell of coffee. The murmur of numerous teachers grumbling about trivialities, to themselves or anyone in their vicinity, filled the room. Some female teachers chatted self-consciously in the corner of the room. I poured a coffee and sat down alone.

The bell rang and so off I went to teach my first class of the day. I sat down at my desk and watched the class gradually fill up. It was a young class; they were all

12 or 13. It was Monday—that meant Shakespeare. We read *The Merchant of Venice*. In fact, I read and they yawned, chewed, whispered, and passed notes. They thought I didn't notice but the truth was I didn't care. I gave them a generic question to write down and answer and watched the angry looks they gave me, their eyes filled with teenage venom.

Every pupil I taught loathed me. I think the thing they despised most about me was the fact that I didn't care if they liked me. I was one of the younger teachers, age wise. They were the ones who knew what it was like, who were friendly and were less strict. I hated the young teachers when I was at school. They seemed desperate to be popular. The young teachers had not yet given up on their youth and they acted like they were desperate to be "hip". This schoolboy notion had a lasting effect on me and was probably the main reason why I treated my class more like vermin than comrades.

The lesson ended and they shot out of the classroom with sudden vigour. I gathered up my things and headed back to the staff room.

There was a 30 minute break and I had a further hour off because I had no class to teach. I hoped no one would spoil it. Things were going well—during the break I avoided all potential conversation by maintaining a fixed stare on the tired, worn down carpet. On the bell's ring, most of the teachers left and the

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS: Keep those submission coming. Remember to put your name, contact info, and word count on the story itself. Attachments should be a word, plain text or RTF file. If you don't have a story to submit, write to me and tell me about something you've read recently. Or just tell me what you think of the fiction. I really like hearing from people who read the fiction section! Send your stuff to me at fiction@punkplanet.com. —Leah Ryan

remaining ones, with no classes to teach, got desperate for conversation. After 20 or so minutes, one teacher, with no options left, approached. She ignored my apparent fascination with the brown carpet and spoke.

"Hi!" she shrieked.

I slowly looked up to see the brown-haired geography teacher who was in her early 20s. She smiled. I sustained my emotionless expression.

"Hullo", I replied, not in the warmest fashion.

"You OK? Got a hangover by any chance?"

"What? No, I don't drink. It's a fool's game."

"Really?"

"Of course. I only shoot up smack nowadays."

"H-h-heroin?"

I nodded matter-of-factly, told her it was time for my mid-morning fix and left. I smiled as I strolled outside, knowing there was one less person I would have to speak to again. I kept walking until I was a safe distance away and then I pulled out my hipflask. I drank about half of it and returned to school. My mood was brightening.

I returned just in time for my next lesson. It went basically the same as the last one. I was on autopilot; I was always on autopilot, except when I was intoxicated. The lesson passed, not quickly or slowly, but simply passed.

Then it was time for lunch. I bought a cheese sandwich and sat down among the teachers. The sandwich tasted like cardboard and I couldn't bring myself to finish it. The teachers talked and talked, some barely stopping to breathe. I heard

the words but did not listen.

My post-lunch class was my worst.

The pupils were constantly reminding me that their exam was fast approaching. As I started to speak, one girl interrupted me.

"Are you going to tell us what to write in the exam? It's only a month away, you know . . ."

As her comment received unanimous approval from her peers, one voice rose above all the others. It said:

"You ever thought of *teaching* us once in a while?"

The voice belonged to my least favorite pupil. He resembled an ape and they shared a common IQ. He was the worst of a bad bunch and I hadn't liked him from the first lesson I had laid my eyes on him.

"Yes, but the feeling passed." I replied.

I was sitting in the pub once when he walked in, trying to look old. He was all dressed up and was holding a cigarette between his thumb and his forefinger, taking small puffs and not inhaling. I was just about to go tell the bartender the boy's age, when the manager came and escorted him off the premises. I laughed and ordered another beer.

"What do you think are the reasons for the downfall of the protagonist in the novel?" I proceeded to ask my mentally underdeveloped student.

"How would I know?" he counter-questioned.

"Try reading the book."

Then I went on to speak at length on the numerous factors at play in the novel. I gave my enemy what he asked for, because I knew he didn't really want it. The class asked me questions regarding all

areas of the book and I answered each one of them, just to prove that I could teach, but that I didn't want to usually.

The following lesson, my last of the day, was back to normal. Nothing had really changed. I gave the apathetic pupils my trademark indifferent teaching and they were unaware that I was capable of anything more.

Just as I was about to leave for home, I ran into the Head. He told me that I was just the person he was looking for and told me to step into his office.

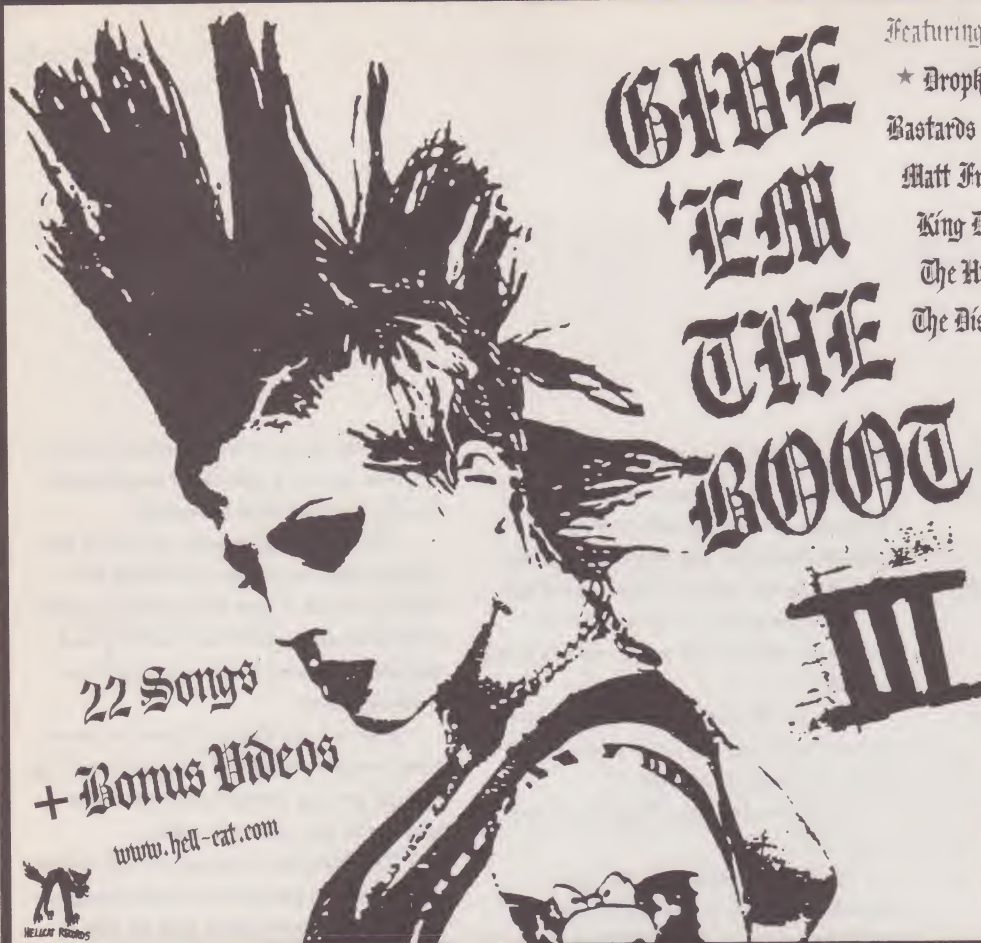
The Head's office was at least double the size of my bedroom and was immaculately clean. We sat down and he told me the problem.

"I've been getting a barrage of complaints from the parents of your students. They say that you are unhelpful to their children, show no interest in teaching the course properly, and some even implied that you are a drunk. I've given you numerous warnings to put a handle on your drinking and you have ignored every one of them. And, if that wasn't bad enough, now I hear that you are addicted to heroin! Half a dozen teachers told me today, in confidence, that you are a junkie who is a danger to yourself and your pupils. I have had it up to here with you, I'm afraid I am going to have to terminate your position at this school."

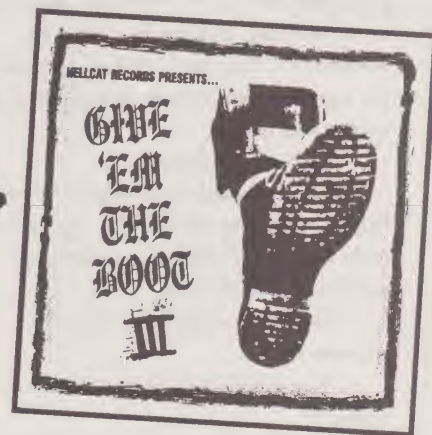
"Fair enough" I said and walked out the door.

That night I got drunk and, the next day, I slept until noon. ©

Alex Singerman lives in Glasgow, Scotland. He is sixteen. He recently sat the school scholarship exam. He did not succeed.



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Booking the Big Show

By Heather Whinna

I must have seen over 200 shows between the ages of 12 and 17 at every VFW Hall between Governors Highway and 127th. I didn't often venture too far east or west, although I did see my share of shows at McGregors in Mount Prospect—Screeching Weasel, Gwar, Life Sentence, Gear. I am sure you can imagine the others. The VFW Hall in Harvey was closest to home and I saw Dead Steelmill play more times than I can count. Record Swap in Homewood did not have in-stores then, but there were a lot of basement and bonfire parties with whatever band would show up for no money. I played one once myself.

Not all of the shows were good, but I didn't always go to see the band anyway. It was my salvation. I went there to see friends, stand at the front of the stage and maybe "hook-up."

I did get to see a lot of friends that I wouldn't have otherwise. Despite—or maybe because of—the fact that I weighed 92 pounds I did make it to the front of the stage almost every time. But the "hook-up" never happened. Maybe it was because I weighed 92 pounds. Or maybe it was because punk-rock boys like new-wave girls. Nevertheless punk-rock shows were the shining light at the end of my miserable tunnel.

I continued to see rock shows in what I like to call my "college years." DeKalb was not exactly a mecca for awesome shows—in fact I don't think I ever saw a good show there. Shorty, who lived in DeKalb, didn't even play there. Actually come to think of it, I did see The Jesus Lizard at the Eagle's Club. But that's it.

I moved to Chicago and saw rock shows every weekend. I couldn't wait to turn 21 so I could see any show I wanted. I have heard a lot of people say that. Turning 21 wasn't about buying alcohol, it was about getting into Dreamers or Lounge Ax or Exit.

I continue to see rock shows and I still do it for more than the music alone. I still do it to see friends. I still make my way to front of the stage (although now I impersonate a waitress by putting dollar bills in between my fingers and raising that hand straight in the air. I say "excuse me" politely and I pass for a waitress every time.).

About five years ago a woman I worked with asked me if I wanted to start promoting shows with her. It sounded like a good idea. It seemed like it would be easy. I spent the majority of my weekends since seventh grade at shows and I had managed a couple of comedy clubs, so I figured "Why not?" But our partnership was doomed when she wanted to name it MEOW. It fell apart pretty quickly after that. Last I heard she works for a booking agent, so it looks like she is exactly where she wants to be. And I am as well.

I started out putting together a couple of small shows for

friends and quickly jumped into large-scale shows with both feet.

After last summer's Fugazi shows I put together at the Congress Theater, I received the most amazing thank-you letter from Ian MacKaye. In turn, I tried to summarize in a few sentences what an amazing gift it is for me to be allowed to put together their shows here in Chicago. First of all, it's Fugazi. But most importantly this completes a circle in my life that I never imagined I would have the chance at.

I am not a promoter. I never wanted to book bands. Putting on shows fell in my lap. Putting on Fugazi shows happened because I live with Steve Albini—don't think I am unaware of that. Maybe, just maybe, if I had continued to put shows together for a long time Fugazi might have come my way. But for me it was basically Dis, then Brainiac, and then Fugazi. I am pretty lucky to be in my shoes. Growing up on 159th & Kedzie will remind you of that every day.

But really, anyone can do it, as long as you have a couple important traits. I am honest, reliable, organized, and willing to do whatever needs to be done myself. If this is you, then you too can put on a show for 40 people or 4,000. There is very little difference between the two (although for this DIY I'm concentrating on the 4,000 scale of things—previous DIY Files and plenty of other sources cover the 40 person show).

Getting Started: Honesty is the best policy

The first show I did that was in a venue that could hold more than 250 people was a three-night benefit for Sue Miller & Julia Adams of Lounge Ax fame at the Congress Theater. I don't know what the fuck I was thinking—the Congress can hold 3,000 people. But for some reason, I wasn't worried at all—who knows why. I didn't even know Sue or Julia that well, but I had some really good moments in their bar and wanted to help. Maybe that clouded my judgement. Although the shows turned out well, I wish could go back now and do them over again. I have learned a lot since then—all of it on someone else's dime, mind you. That is the most important thing you can remember. If you fuck up, you fuck up someone else's money.

The first place to start when putting on a show like this is with the band. You should only ever work with people you know or have good reason to believe are honorable. The last thing you need is someone else acting like a jag and ruining your reputation.

(Did you know "jag" is pretty much a Chicago word? I was in hysterics when they started that TV show *JAG*. They even say "jag officer" in the previews. It's unbelievable! So unbelievable,

in fact, that I called a friend to ask how they could get away with it. He is living in California and told me that no one knew what he was talking about when he said "jag" in LA. Turns out it's easier to make fun of people from LA than I ever imagined.)

Finding a band that is honorable is important, but doing a good job has a lot to do with you being nice and honorable as well. This may not seem true if you have played at The Metro or The Empty Bottle, but those guys have particular reputations because of it. What I am trying to say is, unless your band registers on the *be nice to these guys* scale, consider it promotion alone if you are playing The Metro, and be prepared to call Schuba's if you get a "solid" date at The Empty Bottle.

The first show I did for a band by myself was for The Bollweevils at The Fireside Bowl. It was pretty easy. I called Brian Peterson at the Fireside, I made flyers, and I passed them out. They sold out the show. In fact, too many people showed up—Ken Weevil felt bad for those who could not get in and gave them free CDs.

There were about 300+ people there. At five dollars a head we made more than \$1,500. The house took \$125. I took \$20 to cover the flyer expenses and the bands got the rest. I gave the opening band \$200, the second band \$400, and The Bollweevils \$800.

When it came time to give Ken the money, he freaked out. He was confused how they could make that much money. He was mumbling about how this was enough money to buy a van. I told him to look around, add the number of kids up and multiply that by five. It was *his* money, he earned it. I reminded him that about a month before he had sold out a Wednesday night show at The Metro (which holds 1,000 people)—surely they made at *least* that much money there. He told me they made \$300.

You see, honesty counts. If you are always honest and friendly you create a world of talented and wonderful people around you from whom you can always rely on to work your shows.

Getting a venue

It is very difficult to play Chicago in a room that holds more than 1,000 without having to deal with JAM Productions or Clear Channel (this is true in many other cities as well, just with slightly different players). There are many bands that are offended that they are locked out of any other options. These companies have crazy ways of holding back your money. With them, *everything* is difficult and *nothing* is simple. Examples are endless: Everyone who works at the club is paid union wages—if you play a show at The

Aragon, a union forklift operator must lift your gear on stage. He may very well make more that night than any individual band member makes after they divvy up the money. With these types of shows, you have no control over the security. The band does not get money as a direct reflection of door sales. There may be some crooked deal where if you sell 2,000 tickets you make \$1,000 but if you sell 2,800 tickets you make \$8,000. They have too many people working and everyone needs to get paid. Tickets will be sold through Ticketmaster and the house may take up to 35 percent of your merchandise sales. I could go on.

So to break the venue monopoly, you're going to have to find somewhere outside of that loop that is still a room that's the proper size for the expected audience. I have two secret weapons. Here they are:

- Drive around and look for places (banquet halls, rental auditoriums, theaters)

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- Find out where the last big metal show was. I am not talking about Metallica or Slipknot. I am talking about something like Mayhem. I assure you when I walk through the door the owners of that venue are glad to see me. I look completely harmless. They look at me and think there is *no way* the cops will have to show up for this.

Now it is time to talk business. I don't like to pay more than a dollar a head for rental (smaller venues may even let you keep the door and they keep the liquor sales). Once you have the room, you will have to sign a contract. The contract should include insurance and clean-up expenses. Make sure that you ask if this is all the money you will owe them, ever. Be aware that you will have to pay your city's "entertainment tax." In Chicago, it is a fixed percentage for how many tickets you sell, which you won't have to pay until the night of the show. Now here is the part that sucks: You will need half the money up front. That is the part

that makes it *impossible* for many people to put on a large show. You can try to work something out with the band, but there will be other expenses along the way as well. The minute you start selling tickets you will get that money back but you have to be able to come up with the money in the beginning.

Tickets

You will need to have tickets printed. I found a guy that I know and trust. I always use him. It is the same way for everyone I work with—I *always* work with same people. The tickets should have all of the important details—band name, date, time for doors to open, theater name and address—printed on it and should be easy to read. Numbering the tickets is a big pain in the ass, and at this point I feel like it is pretty optional. I did it for a long time just because I felt like I needed to, but I am steering away from it now. It sucks for the guy who has to do it and the benefits are easy to argue with.

The key is that the tickets must be made in a way that they *can not be duplicated*. I stick with hand-screened tickets. They are pieces of art and look way better than your Danzig at the House of Blues ticket. But tickets done this well will cost you about 25 cents a ticket. That is a lot of money, but it is worth it. The security of knowing the ticket can not be duplicated is worth it. All of this work is only needed for tickets that will be sold before the night of the show. I like to get a two month jump on a show if possible.

Your ticket cost can be deflected if you consider sponsorship. I am not talking about Bud Light, but a local independent business might be interested if your concert-goers could also be their customers. A record store is an ideal candidate. A small independent store will see the potential in being associated with your show. I always work with Reckless Records. I make the tickets available only through them. They put their logo on the ticket and occasionally they will make the ticket a discount coupon for a future purchase. They help me out with the cost of the ticket and I send 3,000 people into their store to buy them. I also buy pizza for the employees the day the tickets go on sale. (In Chicago, Gino's East is a great selection. Apparently no one cares for Hawaiian pizza except me.) I also offer two tickets to any employee who wants to go. You should make sure the store counts the tickets when you hand them over. They should sign some sort of record of the exchange so no one is confused as to how many tickets were given. Pick up money frequently from the store and bring in Girl Scout cookies or a case of beer when you do. Selling 3,000 tickets to *anything* is a pain in the ass and small tokens of your appreciation go a long way.

So you know how to print your tickets and you've figured out a place to sell them at, but how much should you charge?

This is obviously up to the band, but it needs to be enough to cover your costs as well. I have been known to argue for the six dollar ticket with Ian MacKaye and succeeded—I have dreams that one day I will hear a "yes" from him to eight dollars. Remember: when you are talking about 3,000 people each dollar added to a ticket pays for one entire expense.

In order to get tickets out as far as possible, I used to sell tickets at record stores in the suburbs and surrounding states. It sucks. I had to drive out to each one and set up the deal. I had to come by and pick up money and I have to deal with them if there is a discrepancy. I only did it because I thought those poor kids in St. Charles would have no other way to get tickets. But now I've come to the conclusion that the 30 kids from St. Charles, 20 kids from Tinley Park, and eight kids from Bloomington, Indiana can take a drive into the big city to get their tickets. I'm not doing it anymore. One thing I do make sure to do, however, is release a couple hundred tickets the day of the show. That way no one can scalp tickets outside and I don't have to hear any sob stories.

The Internet is also a good place to sell your tickets. The last show I did was The Breeders at The Congress Theater. They had not played a show together in years so I needed to make tickets as easily available as possible which means credit cards and the Internet. This is where finding good people who want to help you out just for the sake of helping out comes in. Matt Rucins from Schubas offered to sell the tickets from their web site. It was a lot of work for not much money but he did it because he is that kind of guy. He cut me a check for the tickets purchased—actually, he cut Kim a check. The day of the show he gave me a list of names for the "will-call" window. That shit makes me really nervous. I hated the idea of people showing up to the show and saying "I bought tickets off the Internet," but it went smoothly.

Another thing to consider is doing some extra work for people who might be coming from out-of-town. I always set up a phone line for the show and offer to hold tickets at the door for these folks. I have to tell you that doing this takes up a lot of time, you deal with a lot of freaks, and you don't sell that many tickets. But for the one kid who comes in from a foreign country that it makes everything worthwhile.

There was a guy from Italy who came in for the last Fugazi shows. He was *so* happy and grateful, it was almost overwhelming. He showed up to the show hours early. He bought one of Jay Ryan's posters for five dollars before they sold out. He stood up front, stage right, the whole night. Every time I saw him I got choked up. It reminded me how a rock show can be so important to someone. After the show he came up to me to thanked me and was fighting back tears. At that point I freaked out and grabbed him by the arm and shoved him and his poster

in everyone's face backstage and begged them to sign it. Fugazi put him on the guest list for the show the next night in Wisconsin. *That* is why I set up an extra phone line. That must also be why 40-something-year-old guys still lug their tired asses around in a van for months.

Promoting the Show

There is no way around advertising. You can make up flyers at Kinko's, but if you need 3,000 people to buy tickets, you've gotta get an ad in a paper like the *Reader* (Chicago's biggest alternative weekly) and/or *The Onion*. That will cost money. Maybe the band's record label will help you out, or maybe you'll have to foot the bill. Either way it comes out of the bands pocket whether from ticket sales or record sales.

You should post a press release on appropriate Internet message boards. You should fax press releases to anyone you think might care, like record stores, record labels, book stores, etc. Contact the college, public, or other cool radio stations in your town. And be sure to contact writers from every newspaper in case the show doesn't sell out and you need to sell tickets at the door. Remember the big papers too—they come out daily (which means you can get last-minute information into them) and you will be surprised to find allies there.

For example, the *Chicago Tribune's* Greg Kot is always conscientious enough to write a preview of my shows and has really gone out of his way to help a band he likes sell tickets. Greg Kot is one of the good guys—someone who genuinely likes music and finds something he likes to write about. Unfortunately, there are many writers in Chicago and elsewhere who are still working out some sort of weird high school disappointment by stepping into the bully's shoes and embarrassing the little fish in public. I am pretty certain Greg Kot didn't take as many hits in dodgeball as Peter Margasak.

Sound

In Chicago, you *only* need to go to Stan Doty of Pravda Sound *That's* it. If you need the sound equipment and someone to work it he's your man. No one else. Stan has equipment in at least a dozen rooms in Chicago. He owns his own club. He is *totally* professional and takes his job seriously. If he thinks someone else has something better he will call his competition and be the middle man. They don't come nicer than Stan and his daughter sells Girl Scout cookies. Beat that.

If you don't need the equipment, Elliot Dicks and Sheila Cronin are great. Elliot can tell you how there was a benefit for him to buy teeth and Sheila can tell you how she acquired silverware that Jimmy Page ate Cajun meatloaf with as a gift for me. They also have excellent ears, if that kind of thing is important to you.

If you live outside of Chicago, the next time you are at a show and it sounds good, approach the sound engineer. Ask that person if he would be willing to work with you. Engage him in a conversation. If the engineer seems high strung or out-of-his-mind, keep looking. You will know a friendly, responsible person when you meet him. Stan is the man for me because he owns his own sound gear. If you are looking for someone to do sound for a large room that has no in-house sound equipment, ask people you see behind the board at any club. They should point you in the right direction. The cost will vary. When you get in a room that holds 1,000 people you may need to spend \$1,000 on sound. If you are in a room that holds 3,000 people the cost may raise to \$1,500. That figure includes the engineer. The sound company will also have lights available if needed.

A quick side note: Obviously both men *and* women are sound engineers, security staff, and band members. In Chicago everyone is a guy, even if you are a woman.

Pick up money frequently from the store and bring in Girl Scout cookies or a case of beer when you do. Selling 3,000 tickets to anything is a pain in the ass and small tokens of your appreciation go a long way.

Staffing your show

It is imperative that the venue allows me to bring in the staff for the show. They may have legal obligations to have a certain number of security guards in the building, but *my* guys go on the stage, in the box office and take tickets. No matter how nice the theater owner is, professional security acts like professional security. They bum *everyone* out.

I have never had any problem finding people who are skilled to work a show for free. Never. The only guy I ever pay is the guy checking IDs (if I need one). That guy gets paid so he treats it like a job and I don't have to worry. Security never gets paid that way they *don't* treat it like a job and I don't have to worry.

Don't get me wrong: The only people who work security are people that have experience doing it. Finding security is similar to finding a sound engineer. Whatever guys you see working shows you go to may be interested in helping you out for free, as long as you are asking for help once in a blue moon. Generally if you meet someone who works security and is friendly, he may very well be interested in helping out for the sake of helping out—he may not even like the band. I have *never* had someone tell me they wouldn't help. It is not about money. It is about community. Community is

not about your record collection, it is about the way you behave. You will be pleasantly surprised at how many people just want to help.

If you are putting on a show in a space that does not regularly have rock shows, you should hire a couple of off-duty police officers to hang around. They get paid about \$100 bucks a piece. If a police car drives past a place that is usually empty and they see hundreds or thousands of kids coming in or out, they are going to want to know what is going on (generally they want to see if it is a rave). Your cops will let them know everything is fine. They are also good for removing any crazy people if you *do* have a problem your own security can't handle.

The people who work the box office are people who have experience working in a box office before (although my parents worked the last two shows at The Congress). Experienced box staff will know how to look out for the guy who is trying to play some money/change scam and they know how to politely tell someone they are not on the guest list.

You also need at least one other person work with you the day of the show. This person needs to be able to handle the money, find more toilet paper for backstage, or go to your house

If the show fails, *you fucked up*. Maybe you overestimated the audience size, maybe you underestimated the cost of advertising. Any way you slice it is on your head.

to pick up the one thing you forgot. I use Sue Miller & Julia Adams. They know any decision they make is the right one.

I make sure that everyone who works the show can have a friend come for free and I always make sure to have special shirts made for each show. The shirts are passed out to the staff to distinguish them from the audience and as a special thank-you. My dad was offered \$100 for his FUGASHELLEX shirt from last summer's shows. You'd be surprised how much a commemorative staff shirt is appreciated by the people who work the show for free. In Chicago we get our shirts made at Shirts Our Business on Western. It is an independent company who is reliable and will whip something up in a hurry.

Tips on running the show

You need to make sure the show runs on time. If it is an all-ages show then you have curfew to contend with. There is nothing that will put you on the shit list faster with a theater owner than allowing the show to run over. I have walked on stage and told bands they *had* to stop. As long as you respect the theater, they will allow you a lot more room for your special requests.

In addition to what's happening on stage and in the venue

itself, you need to spruce the backstage up. The band will often have requests for food & drinks. Make sure to have plenty of soft, new towels and water. I try do something special for each show. Last time I had a friend set up backstage with a cappuccino machine making fluffy coffee drinks for everyone. The backstage stuff will put you out a few hundred bucks.

Paying Up

After the show you will need to settle up with the owner for the city's entertainment tax and then everyone comes back to your house. The bands and the staff play dice while you type up a detailed expense sheet. If you are able to detail where all the money came from and where it went, you will see the grateful look of a shocked band. They probably never saw anything like this from any other gig and you can feel good with everything out on the table. They may second-guess an expense, but this is your chance to explain your decisions. You know your home town better than they do so you will know why something had to be done the way it was done.

Some people who put shows together factor in a promoter's profit as an expense. Don't even think about it. Basically that expense is set up so if the show fails *you* still get paid for your time. If the show fails, *you fucked up*. Maybe you overestimated the audience size, maybe you underestimated the cost of advertising. The expenses for a show shouldn't be more than 25% of the gross profit. Any way you slice it is on your head. Consider it a lesson and move on. I leave the whole distribution of money up to the headlining band. They can pay me or not. I believe the "going rate" is 15 percent, but I have a job for a living. I do this because it makes me feel good. Fugazi are very generous. So was Kim Deal.

If you do a "benefit" and you take money for yourself, you're an asshole. You should be able to get almost everything for free if you're doing a benefit. That includes the promoter and the performers. It has only been shows in large venues where I have ever accepted money. Everything else is a good lesson. The amount of money to be made from a show with 300 people isn't enough for you to dip into. The touring band probably needs it more. Again, this is not how I make my living. I work so I can do the things I love without letting money get in the way. That's the way it works out best for me.

Finally, one last note: A few years ago Eddie Vedder wanted to bust Ticketmaster's stranglehold on selling tickets. I kept thinking that guy needs to pay me a *shitload* of money and I will take a year off and go across the country and set up an entire tour for him. I would need a lot of money to give up my life for a year. But the result? He could play in independent theaters and sell tickets in nice record stores and make more money than he ever imagined was possible from a tour. Not only is it better this way, but without exception it is more profitable.

Can someone pass that message along? ©

DIY sex EARLY TO BED

by sex lady searah

Hey Sex Lady,

This is gonna probably be the dumbest question ever, but I need to ask someone it since I've been thinking about it way too long and all my friends will probably laugh at me for asking them. Anyway, this is the problem: there's this chick at my school who I've been OK friends with for awhile and she's really cool and nice. Whenever I am around her I always act stupid and forget things. She thinks I do it on purpose, but I don't. Anyway, I don't know how to ask her out and usually it is really easy for me but I don't want to mess up what friendship we have and I get really nervous, which hasn't happened to me before on something as usually easy as this. The whole thing is pretty dumb so I understand if you don't get back to me on this since you probably have better things to do.

—PR

PR,

Actually, I don't have anything better to do right now, so here is my advice: Talk to her. You are obviously in agony over this chick and that isn't going to just disappear. Yes, there is a risk that it will screw up your friendship, but can you *really* be her friend if you are constantly thinking about her in a romantic/sexual way? Do you ever get to be alone with her? Can you ask her out for coffee or something? Or maybe next time you are at a party you can find a little spot to talk and tell her how you feel. Don't make a huge deal out of it when you are talking to her. Just be calm and honest. Tell her why you act like an idiot around her. Hopefully she'll be psyched that you are into her. Maybe she doesn't feel the same way about you, but at least she won't think you act like a jerk because you are a jerk. At the very least, she will probably be flattered that you dig her. This kind of thing can be so hard because you never really know how someone is going to react, but you've gotta be honest with her and yourself. Good Luck!

Dear Sex Lady,

So I've been dating this guy for a few months now and I really like (love?) him a lot. The other day I was using his computer to do a little web surfing and I was shocked to find that he had like 100 porn websites bookmarked, many of them of the "barley legal" type. I am totally freaked! What does this say about how he feels about me? Is he not happy with our relationship? What is wrong with him that he wants to look at naked (supposedly) teenage girls when he's not with me? I thought just sick child molesters liked that kind of shit. Can I ask him to stop "using" porn?

—Freakin' out!

Freakin',

Pornography can be a really complicated and volatile issue. We all know we could have a heated discussion for years on the pros and cons of the use of porn and the industry itself and probably never really get *anywhere*. Some people think porn is misogynist, exploitative and leads to sexual violence while others think it is empowering, sexy and even feminist. And lots of people just like to look at it and get their rocks off.

Personally, I don't think it is a bad thing. Sure, a lot of it is sexist or just plain gross, but some of it is *hot* and I strongly believe that the right to make and view porn should be vigilantly protected. Freedom of speech, yo! But your question wasn't about the merits of porn or my take on the issue, it was about your boyfriend. So let's get to that, shall we?

First of all, your boyfriend's use of porn most likely has absolutely *nothing* to do with how he feels about you. Most of the guys (and gals) I know that look at porn and enjoy it, have been looking at porn since they were teenagers (or younger) and do so no matter if they are in a relationship or not. It is a separate thing all together. I highly doubt that his looking at porn has anything to do with you dissatisfying him.

Looking at a picture of some naked 18-year-old is about *fantasy*, not real life. It is really not *all* that different than you looking at an image of Matt Damon (is that who straight girls find hot?) and imagining him making love to you on some beach or something. Just because you are happily banging a *real* person, it doesn't mean your fantasy life gets turned off. I think that most porn users know that they have just about *zero* chance of ever screwing the people whose images they are whacking off to and that makes it a safe way to fantasize (wouldn't it be worse if you knew he was whacking off thinking about your best friend or mom?). Looking at porn does not make your boyfriend a sick person. Yes, some sick people look at porn, but that doesn't mean everyone who likes it is a molester.

My hope is that you two are forging an honest sexual relationship and would *know* if he were unhappy. But you know what? You can ask him. I think you should tell him you found his "stash". See what his reaction is. Ask him what you asked me. Is there something missing from your sex life? Chances are, there isn't but if there is, maybe you two can work on that. And be honest and tell him how the porn makes you feel. Hiding your feelings will just make this whole thing fester and explode.

But honestly, I don't think you can ask him to stop looking at porn. It is a bad road to go down when you try and control someone else's fantasy life. Maybe he'll want to give it up for you, but for god's sake don't force him. It is a harmless pastime and if you have a solid relationship, it shouldn't threaten that. If, however, he is spending all his time looking at porn and not enough time banging your brains out, there may be something more going on. But since you didn't even know he looked at porn, my guess is he doesn't do it often enough to interfere with your sex life. Good luck! ☺

Got questions? E-mail me at diysex@punkplanet.com. Live in or plan on visiting Chicago? Swing by my shop, *Early to Bed*, at 5232 N. Sheridan. Just want to buy some kick-ass sex toys? Visit online at www.early2bed.com. Thanks!

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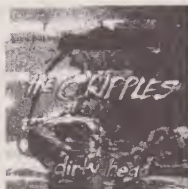
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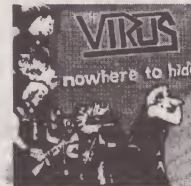
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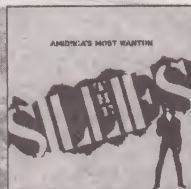
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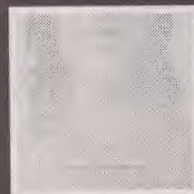
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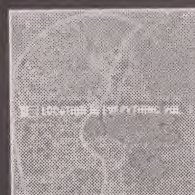


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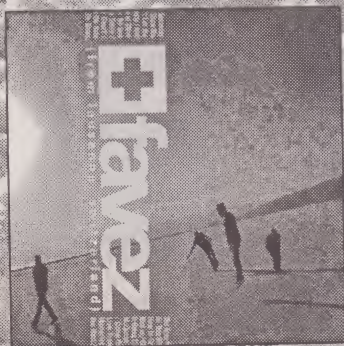
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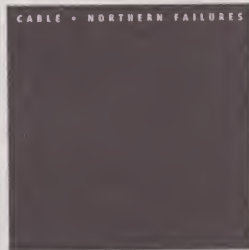
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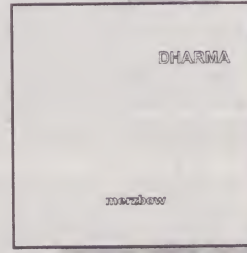
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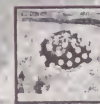
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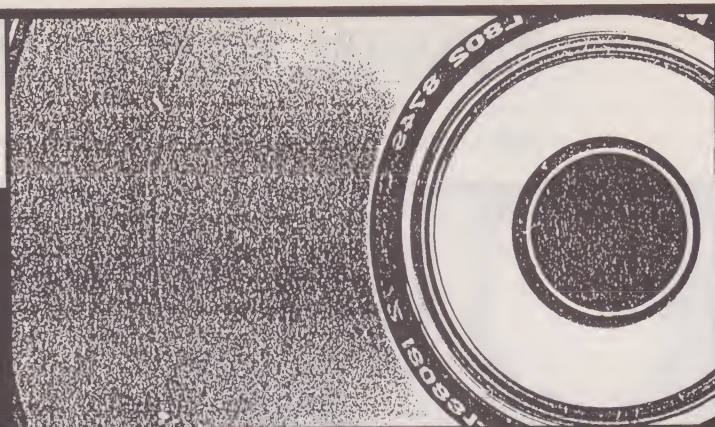
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PLASTIC MUSIC



31 Knots - A Word is Also a Picture of a Word, CD Weird emo releases often throw me for a loop, and this oddball item is no exception. Whine, whine, whine. If you want to check out a Portland band, check out The Riffs (reviewed this issue) instead. (AE)
Fifty Four Forty Or Fight, P.O. Box 1601, Acme, MI 49610

90 Day Men: - To Everybody, CD Soft, quiet, and almost classical sounding with all of the piano solos going on. I guess it's just something you need to be in the right mood to listen to. (RS)
Southern Records inc PO Box 577375 Chicago, IL 60657

♪ **AMFM - Getting Into Sinking, CD** "Come Suck Down a Cloud," that's a song title on this record. It puts an image in my head of some burnout in tie-dye and hemp jewelry with long, stringy, greasy hair motioning to me to come take a hit off his slobbery bong. "'Sup, bro? Come suck down a cloud. Watch out, though—my ferret's loose." Yech. I didn't really anticipate some bad hippie fuckengruven jam rock with this, and luckily that's not what I got. These guys would be nice to hippies, nod when they speak of how great Phish is and generally humor them. Then they'd go home and play this sweet-sounding pop. It's mostly guitar, light drumming and vocals, but the guitars are often layered—you'll hear an acoustic, an electric (on the clean channel), the occasional effects pedal—which produces a nice sonic texture. Adding some topography to that texture are other sounds such as organs, bells, extra percussion. It all blends well with nice, low-key vocals that I guess are kind of similar to someone like Elliott Smith. Although this is really poppy, it stays musically interesting, and the overall feel warrants more listens. Fans of indie pop such as Pedro the Lion, Apples in Stereo, Ted Leo, etc., will probably enjoy this. I'm not a huge fan of those bands (I do like Ted Leo, though), but I like this so far. Maybe it doesn't always have to be about the rock. (KR)

Polyvinyl Record Company, P.O. Box 1885, Danville, IL 61834, www.polyvinyl-records.com

♪ **Ampline - The Choir, CD** These guys play really good instrumental indie rock, but I wish they had a singer. I've been hearing a lot of instrumental bands lately and it's a shame that the bands that can actually play well don't have vocals, while bands that focus on hooks aren't

all that interesting musically. Oh well. Well, here you have 2 guitarists, a bassist and a drummer. There's a vibraphone on a couple tracks that I could do without. Good indie rock type arrangements: one guitarist playing rhythm, the other playing more intricate at times, the bass rumbling away in the background and the drums bringing it all together. I think I like the bass most of all in this band. You barely hear it if you're not paying attention, but there's lots going on with the old thunder broom. It's hard to tell if a singer would help this band or hurt it, because everything sounds good together already. I just want a band with the full package. And maybe a woman with the full package. But not package as in twig and berries. (NS)
Tiberius, 4280 Catalpa Dr., Independence, KY 41051

The Anniversary - Your Majesty, CD This is an alright emo sounding CD. Nothing too spectacular. I'd only suggest getting this if you're a hardcore fan of the genre. (RS)
Vagrant Records 2118 Wilshire Blvd Santa Monica CA 90403

Avoid One Thing - S/T, CD Joe Gittleman of Mighty Mighty Bosstone fame. Very mature, grown up, sing along punk, LA stylee Pop Punk. Makes you wanna smile, make a funny face, and play air guitar. Remind's me a bit of Doug and One time Angels. "Lean on Sheena" is a definite pop hit-fucking ruined by the silly primitive electronic beat. Don't be surprised if you hear Avoid One thing on KROQ at some point. Either way, it's late, and this is a good pop punk record. (GBS)
Side One Dummy Records 6201 Sunset Blvd, Suite 211 Hollywood, CA 90028

The Band From Planet X - You Should Never Have Opened That Door, CD This is the new full-length from a kitsch Cramps-influenced band from Ontario who have been together for a long time. The vocals have a major Jello Biafra influence and the pseudo lo-fi production works very well for the sound they're going for. (AE)
Strange Strange Records, www.geocities.com/bfpx

Belvedere - 'Twas Hell Said Former Child, CD Very tight Canadian skate punk, in the vein of Pennywise. I might hold onto this one— it's catchy and fun and you can bet your ass it's someone in this world's

Can we have a word over here? Thanks. Firstly, the reviews are short this issue. We know that. Due to a massively sad and unfortunate family situation, the reviews couldn't get the attention they normally receive. That's how life works sometimes. Apologies all around for there only being nine pages of records. That's not all to say however. Starting with the next issue we will begin to transition the reviews section to Punk Planet's home base in Chicago. What this means is that over the next couple issues more things will probably fall through the cracks then normal (insert any joke you want there). Part of the move to Chicago is to keep better track of the reviews and hopefully achieve the most consistent, complete, and accurate review section possible. That will take time, so bear with us. Sadly, however, the transition to Chicago means that we say goodbye to Eric Action as the editor of these reviews. Eric has been working on reviews in PP since the second issue, and has been the editor of this section for years and years. Lucky for us, he's agreed to stay on as a reviewer (and lend his advice on the editing process as well). He's one of the best we've got and we're glad he's staying aboard. Eric: thank you so much for everything over the years. It's a thankless job, I know. This could not be possible without you. Finally, if a reviewer doesn't like your record, that doesn't mean that it's totally terrible or anything like that. It's not institutional policy that your record is good or that it's bad, it's just one reviewer's opinion—so don't freak out. We're sure you put a good deal of work into your project, and that alone is certainly worth some congratulations! But please, if you're pissed at a review, remember: it's not Punk Planet, it's just one reviewer.

favorite CD. (AE)

Jump Start, P.O. Box 10296, State College, PA 16805

The Cancer Conspiracy - The Audio Medium, CD Riff driven, instrumental rock. The final track sounds like the soundtrack to a PBS documentary. My roommate says they sound like every other band. I wonder what she meant by that? Either way, it wasn't a compliment. (GBS) Big Wheel Recreation 325 Huntington Ave #24 Boston, MA 02115

The Capital City Dusters - Rock Creek, CD This one is growing on me, big time. The Capital City Dusters have energy and a powerful recording in one disc. The vocals are done so well, with overlaps and calls that took effort that paid off. As time goes on I am beginning to really appreciate the disc and have stopped thinking that part sounds very Fugazi or Shellac or etc. (EA)

Dischord Records

The Chubbies - Sleeping In His Tee Shirt, CD I have a soft spot for the Chubbies. This girl outfit does the pop-girl-thing to almost perfection. This release from Finland is very straight forward and made me smile a lot, not punk kiddies. (EA)

Killer Records killrec@sci.fi

Darlington - Chrysanthemum, 7" Slowed down pop-punk that is super clean and sappy. I suppose the world does need another single (onesides at that) by another band that sounds like this. (EA)

X-Records 2819 Commerce St. Dallas, TX 75226

Dashboard Confessional - So Impossible EP I almost broke down crying while listening to this CD...not really, but it was pretty damn sad. Despite the depressed emo feeling that overcomes you when listening to this, it's still rad as hell. (RS)

Vagrant Records 2118 Wilshire Blvd Santa Monica CA 90403

Dawncore/Darkest Hour - Where Heroes Go to Die Split 5", CD This has "Split 5" in the title, but it's a CD. I smell a rat. Any label with my last name in its address is cool by me, though. This is a two-song split of very heavy contemporary metallic hardcore. Dawncore is from Budapest and is more hardcore and Darkest Hour is from DC and is more metal. (AE)

Join the Team Player Records, Altoettingerstr., 6a, 81673 Muenchen, GERMANY

9 **The Dead Celebrities - The Many Moods Of, CD** This is a nearly great CDEP that alternates between silly A.O.D.-type comedy core and pop-punk. They trick you by putting their best song, a poppy number called "No! You Suck!", first so that you think you're in for a real treat. Then it becomes quickly apparent that they're not the saviors you were hoping for when they turn into a less charming A.O.D. on track two. I love A.O.D., but these guys just can't pull that sound off too well. But there are enough hits on this little EP to make it noteworthy. The pop is as good as any pop I've heard lately, with lots of hooks and delightfully snotty lyrics. The singer has a nice bite to his voice and even though he's probably a young guy he sounds like an older guy who's been singing in bands for at least a decade. Another interesting facet of this CD is the drum mix they chose. The higher end cymbals are prominently showcased, with the bass drum and floor tom mixed way down. Anyway, this is energetic and fun for what it is. I strongly advise they stick away from the faster oldschool hardcore material, though. They just can't seem to pull that style off. (AE)

www.thedeadcelebrities.com

Discount - Singles #1, CD Either you love Discount and Alison's vocals or you hate them, I know both kinds. This is simply a collection of their early singles and I think it is their best stuff. Thick booklet with photos, but little else to add to the package. (EA)

NewAmericanDream NAD 1912 PO Box 265 Balboa Island, CA 92662

The Dishes - Kitschenette, CD The Dishes were a mid to late seventies punk/new wave outfit that is known to punk historians and record nerds like myself. This disc contains both of their singles, an unreleased track and a live set that sounds great. This is one of the many Canadian classics to be released by Bullseye. (EA)

Bullseye Records 180 Station Street, Suite 5, Ajax, ON Canada L1S 1R9

Dynamite Boy - Devoted, CDEP My roommate wonders how many times a band can write the same song a trillion other pop-punk bands have written. OK, so here's the deal: Occasionally catchy pop-punk with Billy Joe-esque vocals and some weird Cult-Simple Minds medley. (KR)

Offtime Records, P.O. Box 479176, Chicago, IL 60647, www.offtime.com

Fast Forward - S/T, CD What in the hell is this? Cacophonous noise that has some bad keyboard-driven beat buried underneath layers and layers of noise and unintelligible vocals. Wow, stupidously bad. (KR)

Vermiform, 112 Harvard Ave., #316, Claremont, CA 91711 www.vermiform.com

Enon - High Society, CD Fifteen tracks of guitar-driven pop that would file with many of the alternative bands of the last decade. It is good stuff, I am not sure if I am in the right mood lately for this - but it sounds are all over the place and the mix of boy/girl vocals and instruments make the fifteen songs a fun ride and keep my along for the whole ride. (EA)

Touch and Go Records

9 **Envy - All the Footprints You've Ever Left and the Fear Expecting Ahead, CD** Holy shit. Some people in Japan have gotten a hold of a Refused CD and decided to go on a rampage. At first, they'll lull you to sleep with Sonic Youth like dissonance or un-intense indie rock buildups. Then they stab you in the eye, and it's screaming, chaotic and blazingly fast. Some songs stray from that ("A Cradle of Arguments and Anxiousness"), at least when it comes to the speed and intensity. The vocals, however, are screamed in Japanese the entire time. There's a tight balance here between restraint and intensity, and these guys bounce back and forth between the two with disconcerting ease. The vocals can get old, at least for me, but the guitars are played so ferociously and the music's so intense that I can get past the larynx-destroying screams. Check out "The Spiral Manipulation" and "Farewell to Words." The more I listen to it, the more I like it. And you also get a glimpse of these assassins because this is an enhanced CD that features two videos. This is a juggernaut deceptively hidden on a piece of plastic. It will destroy you once you put it in your CD player. Use with caution, but damn, it's pretty good. (KR)

Dim Mak Records, P.O. Box 14041, Santa Monica, CA 93107, www.dimmak.com

Estee Louder - S/T, 7" Great sleazy raw punk from Columbus with a raunchy male vocalist backed by equally raunchy female backing vocals. I'm definitely going to look for more by these sleazy motherfuckers. This rocks big time. (AE)

Estee Louder, 78 W. Maynard Ave., Columbus, OH 43215

The Figgs - Badger, CDEP Six songs of pure pop genius from the band that not enough people know and have been around forever. I suggest you hunt down their other LP's, easily found for \$2 or less in many cut-out bins and worth ten times the amount. (EA)

www.hearbox.com

Filthy Thieving Bastards - A Melody of Retards and Broken Quills, CD Upbeat Irish drinking songs are the closest thing I can compare this to. I thought it was pretty good...almost sounds like Dropkick Murphys with a little less energy. (RS)

BYO Records PO Box 67609 Los Angeles, CA 90067

REVIEWER SPOTLIGHT: Art Ettinger (AE)

I'm obsessed with THE TEMPLARS these days. And this time I'm not referring to the Amando de Ossorio characters. They might be the best U.S. Oi band of today. They're prolific as hell so it's hard to pick a specific album to recommend but I guess the best of the batch is the LP collection, "Dans Les Catacombs Du Studio de L'acre 1993-1995." Released on the unduly controversial Vulture Rock label in 1997, this collection features 17 songs from hard to find early Templars records. The sound is heavily influenced by Iron Cross (whom, by the way, the Templars will be on tour with right around the time this issue hits newsstands— YES, YOU CAN SEE THE TEMPLARS AND IRON CROSS TOGETHER IN ONE SHOW IF YOU GET OFF YOUR LAZY PUNK ASS AND LEAVE YOUR SMELLY APARTMENT), but with a big classic rock bent that's only hinted at by other Oi bands. Some of The Templars' absolute best songs are on this collection, including "Victim," "The Sixties Are Over," "Police Informer," "Subculture Kid," "Skinheads Alright," and a blistering cover of Iron Cross' "New Breed." These guys take the simple Oi aesthetic and tweak it a bit with an almost outdoorsy feel via the classic rock riffs and sometimes non-distorted guitar. You can't go wrong with this band.

I'd be lying if I said I was listening to much besides The Templars, but I've taken occasional breaks from them to listen to The Connie Dungs "Turntable" and the V/A Histeria (sic) compilation. I've also been reading Lexicon Devil: the Fast Times and Short Life of Darby Crash and the Germs.

Flipping Hades – Tell Peaches Lula Called, CD Quirky rock with odd lyrics. The singer reminds me of the Talking Heads guy at times. If you're looking for something goofy, fun and slightly rockin', then look no further. I'm actually looking for a Kleenex because I just sneezed and now there's snot in my crudstache. (NS)
Deraillleur, P.O. Box 10276, Columbus, OH 43201

Flogging Molly - Drunken Lullabies, CD It's shortsighted to compare FM to the Pogues. But shit happens and sometimes the comparisons start to carry weight. At least it does on the Arabic flavor of "Another Bag of Bricks," which bears an uncanny resemblance to "Turkish Song of The Damned." Though disappointing that they may have mimicked another in this one instance, Flogging Molly's "Drunken Lullabies" follows closely in the footsteps of their previous two releases and is just as exciting. Their unique blend of Irish Trad., barroom bravado, alcoholic sentimentality, and reverence for the punk beat makes Flogging Molly at once alienating and comforting. Alienating 'cause you can't peg 'em into one box and comforting because their music is embracing and warm, thanks largely to David King's introspective lyrics. Following the simplicity of a few riffs, a couple chords, mandolin, fiddle, tin whistle, and a rock band set up, all wrapped up in a bouncing rhythm, this seven piece outfit from Los Angeles may be only three parts authentic, but all heart. A few re-recordings ("If I ever Leave This World Alive" and "Swagger"), a couple songs that have been road tested over the past year ("Rebels of the Sacred Heart" and "Death Valley Queen"), and eight new ones, "Drunken Lullabies" writhes with passion and honesty. Brilliantly captured on tape again by Mr. Steve Albini, "Drunken Lullabies" has a raw quality to it that is expected with early recordings, not the third. The fact that a band comprised primarily of acoustic instruments can create such a ruckus is relevant at a time where all too many folks are scrambling to recreate a high gain distortion formula—the lesson once again being punk ain't a type of music, it's an idea that can be funneled through many different mediums. Harry Smith on Speed, Hank III yelling out his granddaddy's lyrics while groping a cup of whiskey, and Yeats' lyrics scribbled on bar napkin—how's that? (GBS)

Side 1 Dummy Recordings 6201 Sunset Blvd, Suite 211 Hollywood, CA 90028

Gasoline - Take It To the People, CD Another blaster from Gasoline of crazy fucked up bluesy rock and roll. Really slowed down raunchy tunes that border stoner rock at times. (EA)

Estrus Records

Gauge – The Gatehouse, CD "Hey, dude. I wrote some quiet, depressing songs with my guitar and this computer program. I know you're in the hospital and on a respirator, but would you mind putting some vocals

on these songs? I mean, they're only 7 minutes or so." Yeah, that's what this sounds like. There was already a band called Gauge from Chicago. They were good. You're not. Game over. (NS)

The GC5 - Singles Collection (1997-2000), CD Sounding like Mike McColgan era Dropkicks, early Utters, Stiff Little... you catch my drift. Funny, the GC5 seem to get more raw with age. Frantic and unyielding, the distortion is warm and sometimes you gotta' wonder if they're gonna' hit the next note with out falling over onto the amp, blowing a speaker, or just plain missing the neck all together—all that and I've never seen them. At times reminiscent of Steve Toff's Shananagans, it isn't sloppy rock n'roll, its good ol' punk rawk! Includes a pretty dope cover of Bragg's "There is a power in a Union" (and a Dwarves cover). (GBS)

Cosa Nostro Records 291 Redwood Road Mansfield, Ohio 4497

The Get Up Kids – Eudora, CD This is the Get Up Kids covering a few different bands, with a couple of original songs scattered within the tracks. Some bands being covered include the Pixies, David Bowie, and the Cure. (RS)

Vagrant Records 2118 Wilshire Blvd Santa Monica CA 90403

The Gossip – Arkansas Heat, 10"/CDEP I absolutely adored their debut LP and this extended single, or mini-LP if you prefer, is killer. The Gossip pull from the Bikini-Kill era KRS sound and it never sounded as fresh. My only complaint is a ten minute long, rather boring instrumental to end the CD of six songs. The first five songs are well worth your investment. (EA)

Kill Rock Stars

The Green Pajamas - This is Where We Disappear, CD Dreamy pop in the vein of mid-wave Talking Heads. This band was around way back in the 80's, I believe, which explains the keyboards and drum machine. Fun stuff, though. (AE)

Rubric Records, www.rubricrecords.com

Hacksaw - Turned up Way Down, CD God damn-dirty rock n'roll like AC/DC! A good fucking time. Like some of the soulful Rocket From the Crypt stuff. Marshall stacks, three chord, four on the floor no frills rock. (GBS)

Deranged Records PO Box 543 STn. P Toronto, ON m41 1G7, Canada
www.hacksaw.com

Heaven Shall Burn – Whatever It May Take, CD The only way to tell this modern hardcore metal from real metal is the lack of guitar solos. Other than that, this sounds like death metal. Very fast, very heavy and very professional, but somehow very mediocre. I don't know what to tell you, guys. Maybe incorporate some funk metal style slap bass

REVIEWER SPOTLIGHT: Eric Action (EA)

It was real hard to choose a record for this issue. My father passed away after his second form of cancer. Seeing my dad literally waste away as the weeks, and months went on was painful. Music was a salvation in many ways. I spent most of my drives back and forth to Detroit with old cassettes from my basement. Choosing nostalgia over modern, I listened to mostly non-punk tapes that took me to a time in my life when my dad was a different person. I fell in love, again, with bands that I shouldn't admit to liking. Hell, you have skeletons too. REM, early Cure, and the Smiths were in heavy rotation. This is when I realized how much the "college rock bands genre" still holds up. I listened to the Smiths, "Louder than Bombs" countless times remembering every sappy Morrissey word. Did I really like this stuff that much that I still remember all the words. I am driving back from the hospital and trying to think what I will say at my fathers' eulogy and I can remember every damn word to a double play Smiths album, but I can't seem to remember the things that my dad has meant to me in almost 30 years. Music is so powerful and I suggest that everyone pulls out their favorite records from their past and see what it pulls outta your brain. ¶ That said, Punk Planet has decided to move the reviews to Chicago. I won't be moving so I won't be opening the mail of hundreds of mostly crappy releases in the future. I plan to continue reviewing and wish Kyle all the luck in the world. I have been aboard since issue #2, probably the oldest Planeteer besides Dan. I feel old a lot, don't go to many shows at all, but I still love new bands all of the time. I will miss seeing all the releases every month. In case this space isn't available in the future, I want to give a few hints to anyone sending a release in the future. Don't use a whole roll of duct tape (it pisses off the opener), don't send your Cd's with no case in a super thin envelope and don't expect it to crash, don't send thirty pages of promo info, stickers, photo shoots, and writing (it doesn't get used, appreciated, or read, really), don't send candy (we don't really trust it), don't ask when it will get reviewed or ask for a free copy.

Lately I have finally started listening to newer releases: The Wipers 3XCD boxset is worth its weight in at least silver, Gasoline's new LP., the Briefs singles.

breakdowns. It's time for funk metal to rise again! (NS)
Lifeforce, P.O. Box 938, 09009 Chemnitz, Germany

Hellcopters - High Visibility, CD The Swedish 70's sounding rockers are back with the stateside release of High Visibility. These guys have been around the block a few times now and you really need to enjoy prog-rock with piano solos and all to get into the Hellcopters. They have saturated us with so many records, it is all starting to blend together. (EA)
Gearhead Records PO Box 42129 San Francisco, CA 94142

Hurtmold - Et Cera, CD This half-English, half-Portuguese (?) record really escapes classification. Heavy, deliberate drumming accompanies hard-core like guitars, but then it'll bust into a mellow, jammy song with organs. OK. (KR)
Submarine Records, CX Postal 808 CEP: 30123-970, submarine_recs@zipmail.com.

¶ **Hybrid Mutants - 2 On The Table, CD** Whoa, this CD came at me full throttle from out of left field! I don't even think that makes sense! Fast well-played punk rock. I was going to say that this sounded like skate rock for some reason and then I realized why. They remind me of later Gang Green, who I fucking love. The singer isn't quite as good (bad) as Chris, but he's pretty good. There's only one song dedicated to beer though. These guys have lots of cool guitar rhythms and they even throw in some rockin' solos. The drum recording is a little weak. That's probably my only complaint with this. Oh, and the CD is too short. Add a couple songs about beer and one about skating and one about skating and drinking beer with the devil and you'll be set. Fans of Poison Idea, Gang Green or just good old-fashioned ass kicking punk rock should check this out. (NS)
LEM Records, P.O. Box 3052, Summerville, SC 29484

The (International) Noise Conspiracy - Capitalism Stole My Virginity, CDEP Sweden's version of Rocket From the Crypt are back with a killer three song single. Their name and artwork scream emo, but their music shouts rock and roll with. (EA)
info@g7welcomingcommittee.com

Jane Lady - ST, CD The music is quiet, somber and sparse and the vocals are annoying. The songs take too long to build up, and when they do, you just want them to end. And most songs are over 6 1/2 minutes. Like Nell Carter said, gimme a break! Speaking of which, I have an old

picture of myself taken with Joey Lawrence on the set of Summer Rental. I gotta track that down. (NS)
Spitting Kisses, 61 S. St. Albans St. Apt. G, St. Paul, MN 55105

John Brown Battery is Jinxed, CD I really liked everything about this band...except for the vocals. They were really good despite the singing being offbeat and having no consistency. (RS)
Hewhocorruptsinc. 196 Fairfield Elmhurst, IL 60126

A Life Once Lost - The 4th Plague: Flies, CD Your average hardcore band. Pretty good if I do say so myself. I enjoyed it to the last throat-bleeding vocal. (RS)
Robodog Records 12001 Aintree Lane Reston, VA 20191

Kid Icarus - S/T, CD Out of this world power-pop from North Carolina. This is feel good, happy day music sans the cheesiness often associated with feel good, happy day music. If this were an eBay transaction, this band would be getting glowing feedback. (AE)
Death to False Pop Records, 1510 W. Friendly Ave., Greensboro, NC 27403

Kids Near Water - There is No I in Team, CDEP A heavier take on the melodic emoish punk sound, sorta like Quicksand. The vocals are all pretty similar (yelled without much nuance), but I actually like this. (KR)
Firefly Recordings, P.O. Box 30179, London e17 5fe, UK,
www.fireflyrecordings.com

Kill The Hippies - Spasms in The New Age, CD What a cool name. Dope ass new wave punk; a bit like Wire, a little Devo-esq, with a hint of the growling spirit o' '77. God, I love the Midwest. (GBS)
Rubberband Records PO Box 30248 Middleburghs, OH 22130

King Louie - One Man Band, CD King Louie is a crazy one man band that plays guitar, harmonics, bass drum, and tons of other junk sounds. This is a big mess and probably a trip live. Gotta love, "Don't Cook That Cabbage (it makes the whole house stink)." (EA)
Extraball Records PO Box 40005 Portland, OR 97240

Kosher - Self Control, CD This is great, fast, energetic punk rock. I listened to the entire CD all the way through without skipping over anything (which is rare); that should say a lot for this one. So...check them out! (RS)
BYO Records PO Box 67609 Los Angeles, CA 90067

REVIEWER SPOTLIGHT: George B. Sanchez (GBS)

To commemorate the Man in Black's 70th birthday this year, Sony is releasing a host of JOHNNY CASH records. Along with the his narrative trash (i.e. Ragged Old Flag and America), re-released packages for Live at Folsom Prison, San Quentin, and Jackson are out, but the record that nobody seems to mention is Orange Blossom Special. Classic Cash—lyrically ranging from trains ("Orange Blossom Special" & "Engine 143"), love ("Mama, You Been..." & "Don't Think Twice..."), prison ("The Wall"), injustice ("Long Black Veil" & "All of God's Children Ain't Free"), and folk standards ("Danny Boy," "Wildwood Flower," & "Amen") and backed by the boom chicka Sun sound of the Perkin Brothers. "Danny Boy" is a bit cheese, but Johnny has always been a little funny in that 60's Americana nostalgia kinda' way. The Dylan connection is strong as all hell with three covers and there's a lot of stuff that the Prison recording owners will recognize. But "All Of God's Children Ain't Free" is without a doubt one of the best recordings Johnny Cash ever made. His signature sound, unyielding confidence inseparable from the timbre of his baritone voice, and lyrically observations that Shit Is Fucked Up—straight up, this song alone makes the record indispensable. Mike Ness must worship at the altar of Orange Blossom Special.

EN LA CASA: Flogging Molly: Drunken Lullabies, Tom Waits: Alice, Grandpaboy: Mono, Billy Bragg: Bill's Bargains. Y Tambien: Brendan Mullen & Marc Spitz: We Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold Story of LA Punk, Michael Eric Dyson: Hollar If You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur. **VIVA LA ROLLING THUNDER DEMOCRACY TOUR!**

The Landslide - Get Together, CDEP If you like your music served with extra Brit pop, here's your record. It's not my favorite genre, but these guys sound competent—similar to later Ride, Oasis, etc. (KR)
Dim Mak Records, P.O. Box 14041, Santa Barbara, CA 93107

Lost Sounds - Black Wave, CD Rockin' synth pop reminiscent of bands like Devo and, damn, Yaz (?). It's really rocked out, though, almost like an '80s-sounding Murder City Devils. I'm not sure whether to scoff or rock. (KR)
Empty Records, P.O. Box 12034, Seattle, WA 98102, www.emptyrecords.com

♪ **Little Grizzly - I'd Be Lying If I Said I Wasn't Scared, CD** As far as I know, having grown up in Houston, there's no reason to visit Denton, Texas, where this band hails from and where this CD was recorded. Mark this day on your calendar: I have now discovered a reason to visit that little town in north Texas, and it's called Little Grizzly. You should know the following, reading my reviews: I'm a sucker for insurgent country. This record has that Uncle Tupelo-ish charm (thusly Son Volt and Wilco as well)—the singer even sounds like Jeff Tweedy at times—but no slide guitar, sadly. This band definitely has a more rock feel than those other bands (or at least those bands' earlier stuff) and can sound just as indie as your average tight-sweater-wearing band ("She's Away," "Peel Back the Sun"). But once singer George Neal's drawl kicks in, you know this is an entirely different beast. After all, Texas is a like a whole other country, right? The vocals stray off key here and there, but that keeps the blue collar charm intact. Charming. That's what this record is. And when it's cold and miserable in Chicago, I can put this on and picture miserably hot Texas summers and feel like I'm around something familiar. Of course, I hung out with fellow punk rockers when I grew up in Texas, not dudes who played stuff like this, but that doesn't stop the nice feeling this record gives me. Or will give you. (KR)
Quality Park Records, P.O. Box 2464, Denton, TX 76202, www.quality-parkrecords.com

The Marato - Dirty Stories, CDEP Noodly, dueling guitars that verge on sounding mathy at times, like Don Cab. The sound is a familiar one, almost like Sweep the Leg Johnny sans saxophone. I dare say I recommend this. (KR)
Blue Skies Turn Black, 214 Thornhill, DDO Quebec, H9G 1P7, www.blueskies-turnblack.com

Meat Joy, The - Between The Devil And The Deep, CD Rockin' punk with scowling female vocals. Man, this chick is ornery. I wouldn't want to tangle with her. Listen to these lyrics: "I'm gonna pull lightning out of my eyes, round-house kick you to the curb and hum." That's awe-

some. Sometimes The Meat Joy take it down a notch and get sensitive, but then they're right back to swaggerin' and spittin' venom. I could see them opening for the Supersuckers or Nashville Pussy. They'd all get drunk, then play their show and then blow whiskey fireballs out in the parking lot. But all they really need is someone to hold them. (NS)
www.themeatjoy.com or www.allnightriot.org

The Mighty John Waynes - She Gets Dirty, 7" The Mighty John Waynes have quietly released the best single I have heard this year. Four songs that are so dirty and loud that I wanted to go see 'em live and jump around and get drunk. Recorded by Jim Kuczkowski, who records more than half of Rip Off records releases. This single is well worth the hunt. (EA)
Rock N Roll Blitzkrieg PO Box 11906 Berkeley, CA94712

Misery - The Early Years, CD Bad metal vocals, trudging in that oh-we're-so-fuckin'-heavy way with songs like "Born...Fed, Slaughtered," "Morbid Reality," "Filth of Mankind," and "Blindeed." Make it stop. (KR)
Crimes Against Humanity Records, www.cahrecords.com

Mirrors - Hands in My Pockets, CD Anyone who has ever lived in or around Cleveland has heard of this early 70's band that supposedly spawned the amazing early Cleveland punk scene. Interesting from a historical perspective, this is classic rock with a SLIGHT garage edge. This collection is a must for the classic punk collector or punk Ohio resident. (AE)
Overground Records, P.O. Box 1NW, Newcastle Upon Tyne, NE99 1NW, ENGLAND

Monster Movie - Last Night Something Happened, CD And yet another soft, piano filled band with close to nothing in the way of vocals. Not all that bad if it's your taste though. (RS)
Clairecords PO Box 161372 Sacramento, ca 95816

NOFX - 45 or 46 Songs, 2XCD I liked this band at one time and kind of grew out of them. So I thought I would listen to "45 or 46 Songs That Weren't Good Enough To Go on Our Other Records." Frankly, you already will know if you want this, and I had a lot of fun remembering how adolescent and perverted we all were at one time. NOFX just never stopped being that way. (EA)
Fat Wreck Chords

Noise Ratchet - Till We Have Faces, CD Sunny Day Real Estate clone band from San Diego. This sound is becoming more and more popular for good reason: it does the body good! Actually, this is better than Sunny Day Real Estate. Check this soon to be classic band out. (AE)
The Militia Group, 16662 Goldenwest St. #1, Huntington Beach, CA 92647

REVIEWER SPOTLIGHT: Neal Shah (NS)

The Midwest gets overlooked in the scope of punk/hardcore history, but that area really created a lot of the more interesting and melodic bands. Husker Du, Articles of Faith, Zero Boys, Die Kreuzen, Naked Raygun. All of those bands have stood the test of time for their innovativeness as well as their song writing ability. Another great band that has finally been given a CD retrospective is the BHOPAL STIFFS with the 1985-1989 CD. They were a Chicago area band that played very powerful and tuneful punk rock similar to some of their contemporaries, Naked Raygun and the Effigies. They had records released by Ben Weasel and Martin from Los Crudos back in the day. The singer went onto form Pegboy and some of the Bhopal Stiffs' later material (the EPA 12") sounds a lot like early Pegboy. Besides the 12" this CD contains their demo, a comp. song and some unreleased live songs. The demo songs sound great and 2 of those songs were also released as a 7". This stuff has held up so well and I've been listening to this all the time since I've gotten it. Buy this CD now and go tell Pegboy to put something new out.

Respect: Anthrax, Vio-lence, Verbal Abuse, Foundation (the DC area one), Pop Unknown, Sensefield b-sides, Jawbreaker b-sides, Insomniac, new Ali G. video, deli salsa

Nullunit – ST, CD Okay, I don't understand why people make electronic music other than for dancing. Do people really sit around and go "Ooh, I really like when it goes 'bzz spleork bzz,' and than that other thing goes 'boing' and then the cow farts"? I mean, if you're "experimenting" with electronic music, you should really keep it to yourself. That is, until the day that you can properly make a booty shakin' song and add the sample "Y'all ready for this?" in the correct place. (NS) Jet Glue, P.O. Box 841, Lexington, KY 40588-0841

♪ **pAper ChAse - ctrl-alt-delete-u soundtrack, CD** Liner notes read as follows: "this record is a commentary on the average humans reliance on technology and the division it has drawn between nature and such...this IS a conversation. this is NOT a suggestion on how we can do better, its simply to point out how bad we are in fact doing." Gee, thanks. Such is the point of philosophy and thus seldom has any valuable or practical application. However..."ctrl-alt-delete..." has a sort of rock opera vibe that definitely grows on you in the same way experimental Radiohead can be. Interspersed with guitar tricks reminiscent of Steve Vai, funky Flash Gordon piano shit, and a touch of tool (maybe it's the tone of the bass), this is strange but I can't seem to let it go. Rocking a weird Guy Picatto vibe. (GBS) Divot PO Box 14061 Chicago, IL 60614-0061 www.divotrecords.com

♪ **Paul Westerberg/GrandpaBoy - Stereo, Mono, CD** After reading the latest feature story, I don't have any idea what's going to be going on with Paul or Vagrant records by the time this review hits, but fuck it, there's still a bunch of us that waited in anticipation for this set of discs from the Midwestern maestro. I'll try not to mention the "R" word. Two discs, *Stereo* being Paul doing more quiet, melancholy, *Suicaine Gratification*-type stuff. "Only Lie Worth Telling," "Got You Down," and "Don't Want Never" are lyrics typical of the man who wrote "Dyslexic Heart," a great songwriter who can turn a phrase like so few. "Mr Rabbit," a folk children's song, sneaks up on ya, and with a laugh, it's well received, because Westerberg's humor and silliness hasn't presented itself in a while. A sign of hope, I suppose. GrandpaBoy though, that's the gem here. *Mono* is the garage alter ego of *Stereo*. Thick delay, sloppy riffs, banged out chords, and elastic drumbeats, *Mono* is Westerberg kicking off the yoke like we haven't heard in years. Seemingly spontaneous and less calculated than, say "Looking At Forever," this record hollers on tracks like "I'll Do Anything," "Silent Film Star," and "Eyes Like Sparks" where *Stereo* whispers. There's an element of inconsistency throughout both records though. Unfinished songs, tracks ending early (it kills when "Postcards From Paradise" cuts off early), missed notes and haphazard production. I find it endearing, in the sense that some poems left undone shouldn't be rushed to a finish. Others seem to find this bothersome. That warning aside, it's great to hear

Westerberg's voice again. I recently saw him live and the experience is another story. (GBS)

Vagrant Records PMB 361, 2118 Wilshire Blvd. Santa Monica, CA 90403

♪ **The Pine Valley Cosmonauts - The Exccutioners Last Songs, Volume 1 CD** George Ryan, the republican governor of Illinois has just announced a moratorium on the Death penalty, citing the fact that 100 death row inmates have been exonerated. A federal Judge in Manhattan has just challenged the U.S. Justice Department and the death penalty on the basis of depriving the accused of due process and on the grounds of cruel and unusual punishment. With criticism coming from the inside of the system, the need to create greater public consciousness to the inequalities inherent within the system of capital punishment is more important than ever. What better way to confront this issue than by putting together a collection of death ballads featuring some of the biggest names in alt country. Backed by Jon Langford (of Waco Brothers and Mekons fame) and the Pine Valley Cosmonauts, this collection, featuring Steve Earle, Neko Case, Rosie Flores, Edith Frost, and Kelly Hogan (to name just a few), is as intricate as a genuine piece of folk art. The haggard cover of "Tom Dooley" wanders between the traditional sway and angry grunge-esq. discontent. The ironic swing of "Great State of Texas" points to the absurdity of the death penalty without saying a single word of condemnation. The gentle lull of "Pardon Me (I've Got Someone to Kill)" speaks to the spirit of death ballads; that guilt takes place in the heart of the individual long before a verdict is delivered. To quote Tupac, "Only God Can Judge Me." Anyway, what's to the advantage of this politically inclined benefit is the fact it isn't a preachy, political record that lacks musical focus. These are solid songs, well crafted, and performed according to the emotion pulled forward. Thus, un-alienating to the apolitical and refreshing to the politically motivated. A good collection of great songs for a good cause. Hello? (GBS)

Bloodshot Records 3039 W. Irving Park Rd., Chicago, IL 80618 www.bloodshotrecords.com

Pretty Girls Make Graves - S/T, CDEP So the Murder City Devils broke up, and yes, we're all in mourning. This band features some alumni of said band playing a speedier, more melodic take on MCD's gothic punk with female vocals. Good stuff. (KR)

Dim Mak Records, P.O. Box 14041, Santa Barbara, CA 93107

♪ **The Pricks - Horror House on Highway Five, 7"** Any band that not only knows the film *Horror House on Highway 5*, but also chooses to make a record titled after it and rip off its box art has my vote. For the lame and uninitiated, *Horror House on Highway 5* is one of the odder horror videos to hit U.S. video shelves in the 1980's. Take it from a guy who's seen hundreds and hundreds of horror tapes, *Horror House on Highway 5* is one of a kind. But this is a record review, not a movie

review. The Pricks are grade-A Ohio punk to the max, in the vein of the remarkable 90's Ohio punk bands The Twerps and The Slobs. They even do a cover of the old grade school Halloween song "Old Lady," although they seem to think their own teacher wrote the song and have no idea that's it's a universally loved tune. Anyway, this is fast, spastic, and snotty. Any kid who lives in Rubber City and gets to see this ingenious band in a basement is a lucky little devil! Hell, I might leave Pittsburgh one weekend to find these maniacs myself. The best record of the month, hands down. (AE)

Rubber City Records, P.O. Box 8349, Akron, OH 44320-0349

Q and Not U - On Play Patterns, CDEP This two song single disappointed me a lot. I fell in love with their stellar debut LP last year and had real high hopes. Neither songs had the urgency and excitement that drew me to Q and Not U. I am not giving up, and I am sure the next full length being recorded will be good, though they are now a three piece. (EA)

Dischord Records

Ratos de Porao - Guerra Civil Cannibal, CD With a pic of a woman eating a human leg on the cover a songs with titles like "Estaca Zero a Esquerda," shit, what to expect? Expect super-rocked out, almost Ministry-ish guitar riffs, death-metal vocals y la revolucion. (KR)

Alternative Tentacles, P.O. Box 419092, San Francisco, CA 94141-9092, www.alternativetentacles.com

Reserve 34 - Rain City Games, CD Superfast, screaming punk rock, the type you & your friends played in high school and thought to yourselves, "Dude, we destroy!" Segue with the likes of Gorilla Biscuits. (KR)

(em) Records, P.O. Box 14728, Portland, OR 97293-0728, www.em-zine.com

Triple Word Score - The First in a Long Line of Disasters, CD Coolest part of this record: The sample from *Thrashin'* at the beginning. Then's it's quickly downhill with your typical, speedy, sub-two-minute SoCal melodic punk. No thanks. (KR)

Long Beach Records, 203 Argonne, Ste. 103, Long Beach, CA 90803, www.longbeachrecords.com

The Reunion Show - The Motion, CDEP Sounds like poppy Anniversary stuff. Keyboardy pop punk that tries to be infectious, but only leaves me with a mild rash. There's a song called "New Rock Revolution" which is fitting because (ah, let me just get adjusted) these guys are truly revolting! Oh, that felt good. (NS)

Law of Inertia, 61 E. 8th St. #125, NY, NY 10003

9 The Riffs - A Million Scars, 7" I first heard this band when I got a 7" of theirs to review for PP Issue #41. I loved the record and hoped the band would stay together and do some touring. Sure enough, this excellent garage punk band from Portland is getting lots of exposure as a result of touring with Slaughter & the Dogs and hooking up with TKO Records. Incidentally, fuck MRR for pulling TKO ads and fuck all the anti-speech PC punks who supported MRR in that decision. But I digress. The Riffs are a blast live and their records are damn fine as well. My only complaint is that this recording isn't quite as raw as some of their earlier, lower-fi material. The vocalist still sings off-key to brilliant effect and the songwriting is perfect as ever. I just think the sound quality's a bit too clean for a band that sounds as much like the Spider Babies as they do, but even with the overproduction this is an essential purchase. Garage punk is cheesy by definition, and The Riffs don't shy away from the fact that in the end they're a gimmick band. What's wrong with gimmicks, though??? Everyone should run down to their local vinyl store and stock up on this damn fine band. (AE)

Vendetta Records, 1951 W. Burnside Box 1951, Portland, OR 97209

Blast Rocks!!! - You're Fired, CD Jamie and I were talking the other day about suburban boredom and the therapeutical value of recording goody songs. Such is the Blast Rocks!!! Totally cute and endearing. Casio keyboards, toy megaphones, fuzz guitar & trashcans for drums. Imagination sprung from boredom, equal parts bubble gum purity of Dee Dee Ramone, Julie Ruin ingenuity and the self-assurance of Adam and his package, this is FUN. "Sick," "Atomic Cocktail," and "My Boyfriend is a Zombie" are good times. If you're looking for mindless pop fuckin' fun, the Blast Rocks!!! Are a good spin. (GBS)

S.P.A.M. Records, P.O. box 21588, El Sobrante, CA 94820-1588.

Roman Evening - Together Now, CD The singer sounds like a cross between J. Mascis and Neil Young. The music is quiet, creepy and piano-y. It makes me angry that people have access to all these instruments and recording time and they make this kind of music. I can't even get my friend's crappy keyboard sent out here. Nice packaging though, dudes. (NS)

Bitter Stag, P.O. Box 190008, San Francisco, CA 94119-0008

9 Selby Tigers - The Curse of The Selby Tigers, CD I feel like the older jaded punk rocker these days. I am not excited by much coming my direction any more. Thank you, Selby Tigers. This four piece from the heartland give us what I miss from bands like the Rezillos, Blatz or X. The Selby Tigers pull off the interchanging male/female vocals along with the greats I mentioned without sounding like any of them. You can hear all the great influences in this disc and the recording is clean and you can sing along, because the vocals are up in your face. Clever title song of the disc goes to, "Punch Me in the Face (with your lips)." Hopeless Records were real smart in roping in the Tigers. I can guarantee whether you are a pop-punker, garage-rocker or crass lover you should dig this band. (EA)

Hopeless Records PO Box 7495Van Nuys, CA 91409-4795

Shark Attack - Discography, CD Cover art looks like Pushead (you know, early Metallica artwork). Early 80s thrash ala Suicidal. Traces of Agnostic Front. For a thrash revival band around for less than two years, it seems kinda silly to put out a discography. But fuck, to each his own. A good thrash collection. (GBS)

Reflections Records, Spoorwegstraat 117, 6828 AP, Arnhem, the Netherlands www.relectionsrecords.com

Social Combat - First Strike, CD OK, I'll give you the song titles, you guess what you're in for: "Dirty Politicians," "Kids of Today," "Our Enemy," "Revenge," "Scum," "Together," "Working Class," etc. At least they're from Spain. (KR)

Bronco Bullfrog Records, Apdo. Correos 1474, 07800 Ibiza (Balears), Spain, www.broncobullfrog.com

Speedloader - S/T, CDEP Straight up mid tempo punk that's heavy on the rockin' (maybe similar to Fu Manchu or something). Simple power-chord progressions with mostly screamed vocals and little to hold your interest. (KR)

Handi-Kraft Records, 249 Columbia St., #1, Brooklyn, NY 11231

Speedwell - My Life is a Series of Vacations, CD I like Speedwell. They're upbeat and fun, but with a dark edge just beneath the surface. Think The Get Up Kids if The Get Up Kids were any good. (AE)

Ignition, 1 Chandos Road, Tunbridge Wells, Kent, TN1 2NY, ENGLAND

Straight Outta Junior High, CD I was very surprised when I first heard this CD. Normally when I review, I get CDs that I've never heard of and they end up being not so good. But this is an exception. It combines fast punk rock music with hilarious lyrics. This is really something to check out. (RS)

Indian Burn Records PO Box 24065 Omaha, NE 68124

Strung Out - An American Paradox, CD I'm not ashamed to admit that I used to love Strong Out's first LP, despite it being generic as hell. Strung Out is now not at all generic, but I don't like this as much as their early material. Call me a simpleton. In any case, this album is exceptionally produced and showcases Strung Out's brand of dark metal-influenced pop. (AE)

Fat Wreck Chords, P.O. Box 193690, San Francisco, CA 94119

Superchunk - Here's to Shutting Up, CD Last month I wrote about Superchunks singles collection as a must have for everyone. Now, I will tell you that only those that have grown old with the Chunk should pick this one up. It is slow and has few moments of what used to make this band so great. Sounds negative? I still like this release, but I don't think that many will. (EA)

Merge Records

Suspect Device - Boston Masacre, CD Some great fucking politico pop-punk! Name sake comes from a Stiff Little Fingers song, so that might lead you to a few conclusions as to Suspect Device's sound. Similar to D4, thought not as layered. Catchy and uncomplicated, Suspect Device are lyrically unapologetic in their criticism of empty revolutionary slogans without coming off as cynic fucks. Don't expect any surprises—they're pretty straight forward. I have a feeling they put on a great show. (GBS)

PigPile Music 43 Riverside Ave, #502 Medford, MA 02155

www.pigpilemusic.com

☞ **Taking Back Sunday - Tell All Your Friends, CD** OK, Victory has another band named after a day of the week. I hear they're coaxing the Happy Mondays to reform so they can eventually have all seven days covered. [cue laugh track] But seriously, folks, if you ask me, these guys blow away their like-named label mates Thursday. They continue the melodic path Victory seems to be on these days—hell, this is downright emo. Yes, many of these songs appear to be inspired by females, but they're delivered with two-guitared, dual-vocaled assault that emanates the desperation that probably inspired them with an undeniable power. Some records convey catharsis better than others, and this one practically bleeds it. That's not to say it's balls-out power chords & screamin' for 33 straight minutes. They continually slow it down, build it up, break it down and take it up a notch on this record. Most of the time, they succeed marvelously ("Cute Without the 'E,'" "You Know How I Do")—other times they're not as successful ("Head Club"). But you have to live for the moments when they're at their best: great dueling vocal parts, guitars holding the intensity the drums and bass provide...that intensity takes its cues from hard core but it doesn't come at cost, which is nice. Intensity, melody and the nice things about punk all in a 33-minute package. (KR)

Victory Records, 346 N. Justine St., Ste. 504, Chicago, IL 60607, www.victoryrecords.com

☞ **Tanka Ray - And So I Abide, CD** The singer's voice is so familiar. Almost like Keith Morris when he sings. These guys play very polished and catchy punk. Some would call this pop punk, but I think they'd rather call themselves street punk. Although the way they harmonize "we're angry, we're pissed, we're violent" makes it hard to imagine them being too threatening. It's like in West Side Story. It's hard to think either gang is too tough when they sing so dreamily! But back to Tanka Ray. I could see them on Dr. Strange back in the day. However back that would be. I think their lyrics and their "image" are the only things keeping them from the pop punk crowd. They could probably pretty themselves up and be another Warped Tour band, but judging from their lyrics, they seem really dedicated to their scene, their fans

and their band; and to being hoodlums. These guys are holdin' it down for Kansas City! Ya heard? (NS)

Cosa Nostra, 291 Redwood Rd., Mansfield, OH 44907

Total Sound Group Direct Action Committee - The Party Platform Our Schedule Is Change, CD Another Tim Kerr project that is part of the conspiracy. This Blues inspired project is way cool. You can hear the fun on this project. Raise your fists, shout it loud, "I'm Punk and I'm Proud." (EA)

Estrus Records

Transistor Six - Johnny Where's My Purse?, CD The insert artwork is way cooler than the CD. Indie rock with an assortment of instruments and styles. Eclectic, i.e. crappy. (NS)

Blackbean And Placenta, P.O. Box 1476, Frazier Park, CA 93225

Tub Ring - Drake Equation, CD Hey, I didn't know Mr. Bungle changed their name. Music for a demented fun house, just like the band that so clearly inspired these guys. (KR)

C+P Gods of Rock/deezal Records, P.O. Box 16008, Chicago, IL 60616, www.deezalrecords.com

Ultimo Asalto - Nuestro Orgullo Pasado, CD Here just in time to cash in on the Spanish Oi craze. But the vocals sound more hard-core/death metal than oi, but the basic punk rock behind it is right on par. (KR)

Evil Records, P.O. Box 804, 07800-Eivissa, Balears, Spain, www.evill-records.com

Underdog Conspiracy, The - Victory, CD Do you like God and crappy hardcore? Then your prayers have been answered! Listen to this lyric: "I've given up on the things of this world, drugs sex booze and pornography means nothing to me". Victory? Sounds more like you've lost...your mind! I'll be lucky if I can sell this CD for an Almighty Dollar! (NS)

Pluto, P.O. Box 1201, McKinney, TX 75070

Wallride - Old Ways for the New Times, CD More Spanish (that's Iberian) punk, this time more melodic with girl vocals like the Goops. Basic-sounding SoCal hardcore and not so good. (KR)

Bronco Bullfrog Records, Apdo. Correos 1474, 07800 Ibiza (Balears), Spain, www.broncobullfrog.com

White Collar Crime - Their Laws are Dimwit Greed, CD Bass, piano, vocals and your standard Leftist self-righteous lyrics, including a song called "My Comrades I Failed You." The vocals are shakey, and it's interesting, but that doesn't mean good. (KR)

Soft Skull Press, 98 Suffolk, No. 3A, New York, NY 10002, www.softskull.com

☞ **Wipers - Box Set, 3XCD** Talk about one over-due motherfucker. Greg Sage could have released this in the early 90's as the band that inspired Nirvana and cashed in like crazy. The Wipers were the band in the earliest of the 80's and their debut LP, "Is This Real?" is a classic in any book. It is easy to hear their sound in many of the Northwest bands of the grunge era, but you need these three discs. I will admit that I only had the first LP and the Alien Boy and Romeo singles. I didn't realize how much great material is in the second and third records as well. If that isn't enough you get a lot of worthy bonus tracks. This first disc contains, "Is This Real?" LP and twelve bonus tracks with absolute cool demo track versions of my favorite four songs of the LP. The second disc contains, "Youth of America" a slower LP, but has captured me into so many listens that I don't even mind the 10-minute plus long title track. This disc also has five bonus tracks. The Third disc has "Over the Edge" and seven bonus tracks. You need this disc for Romeo alone. I cannot stress the importance of this release and the fact that Greg Sage, the singer/writer, is putting this out makes it that much cool-

er. I have listened to this 3XCD set about 30 times in the last few weeks alone. (EA)

Zeno Records PO Box 97281 Phoenix, AZ 85060

V/A - Cheese Borger's Pie & Ears, Volume II, CD A low-low-fi comp of Cleveland bands. Featuring a song where a guy repeatedly says, "EYYYYEEEESSSS OF SSAAATTTAAAN!" It's too terrible to be believed. Note to self: Never go to Cleveland. (KR)

Smog Veil Records, 774 Mays, #10-454, Incline Village, NV 89451, www.smogveil.com

V/A - Estrus Double Dynamite Sampler Vol. 3, CD Another sampler, another label. You get a bunch of great garage bands (go buy their proper releases instead): Man or Astro-Man, Cherry Valance, Gas Huffer, Gasoline< Immortal Lee County Killers, Soledad Brothers, Total Sound and more. (EA)

Estrus Records

♪ **V/A - Iron City Punk 3, CD** I haven't lived in Pittsburgh for very long, but I'm downright floored by how many amazing bands there are here. Pittsburgh is a rare city in that it has both a thriving all ages scene as well as a thriving bar show scene. Between the two, there are several shows a week and the focus is at least as much on the local bands as it is on the touring bands. This labor of love comp put out by the folks at Pittsburgh's best record store, Brave New World, showcases the range of remarkable bands this fine city has to offer. A handful of Pittsburgh bands are well-known nationwide, like Anti-Flag, Aus Rotten, and the undying Submachine. You get those here, as well as up and coming greats Silver Tongued Devil, Caustic Christ, Corpus Christie, My Drunk Uncle, Behind Enemy Lines, and nine others. There's even a lost track by the classic Pittsburgh band Half Life. The Pittsburgh sound is generally heavily influenced by old school hardcore, and while this comp doesn't shy away from that fact, it features a wide enough range of punk sounds to please pretty much anyone into punk of any kind. Most bands have two songs on here, so it's a total of 32 tracks and it clocks in at a whopping near 75 minutes! So slip your \$10 to the address below and you won't be disappointed. (AE)

Brave New Records, P.O. Box 71287, Pittsburgh, PA 15213

♪ **V/A - Long Ago and Far Away..., CD** Did anyone wonder how Weezer disappeared for a few years and then blew up proceeding their reentry into popular culture with the single "Hash Pipe"? Well, this three-band comp is one of a thousand culprits that launched Weezer into their current status. Featuring The Carpet Patrol, Fake I.D., and

GoFortyEight, this collection of high school pop punk is what it is. Their freshness to living and ability to worry solely about gyrls makes me long for the naiveté of high school. For fans of smiling, Jawbreaker, No Use for a Name, holding hands, the Promise Ring, and the Riverdales. (GBS)

Lavatory Records, PO Box 64, Raynham, MA 02768 www.lavatoryrecords.com
The Blast

V/A - Lookout! Freakout Episode 2, CD Twenty-six tracks of Lookout/Panic Button releases on one disc at a low, low, price. A handful of these songs have never been released on CD before. Plus a video on the CD which includes a mini-movie with a Bratmobile and Donnas video (yeah!). Your favorites are here: Donnas, Bratmobile, Eyeliners, Ted Leo, Common Rider, Screeching Weasel, Alkaline Trio, MTX, Queers, and more, more, more. (EA)

Lookout Records

V/A - Pizza & Sushi, CD Fun little four-song comp of surf rock from Italy and Japan. The best track is from the Japanese band Mummy the Peepshow. Recommended. (AE)

OMOM srl, via D. Chelini, 3 00197, Roma, ITALY

V/A - RAFR Volume 3, CD This is the third installment of Rock and Fucking Roll and again it's claim is warranted. Favorites include: Humpers, Short Fuses, the Peeps, and Jeff Dahl and Wayne Kramer doing, "Tutti Frutti." Cool comp for the rock and roll / garage fans. (EA)

RAFR Records 11054 Ventura Blvd. #205 Studio City, CA 91604

♪ **V/A - The Thing That Ate Floyd, 2XCD** This re-release probably won't win over the kids, but at a time this was a classic record for pop-punk fans before that genre was old and tired out. I still have my vinyl copy somewhere in the middle of all the other pop-comps out at the time. It is easy to forget the pre-Green Day/Jawbreaker days of this stuff. Cringer, MTX, Stikky, Crimpshrine, and Operation Ivy all still hold up listening to this. A nostalgia trip for me to hear this songs and remembering playing them on a radio show I did many, many moons ago. I don't think many compilations are important anymore. It is so easy to put out your own CD now, that most compilations are just samplers, or throw away tracks. The Thing That Ate Floyd in its four sides of glory gave a chance to document a scene that later blew up in front of our own eyes. The 34 songs and huge booklet on these two discs aren't all classics, but this release sure is. (EA)

Lookout Records

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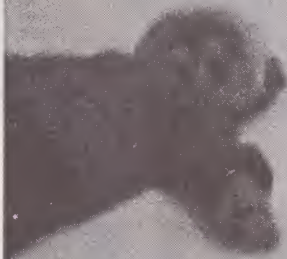
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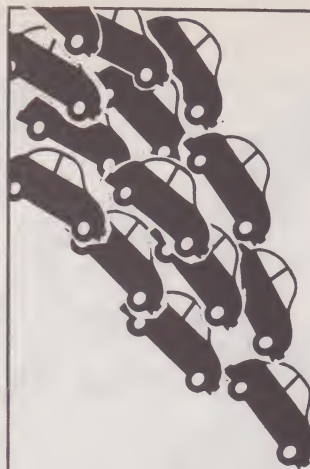


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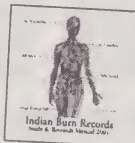
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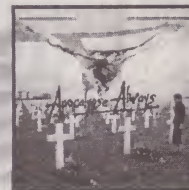
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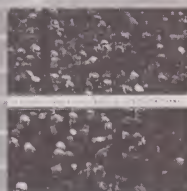


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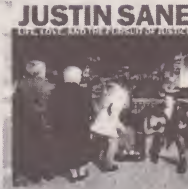
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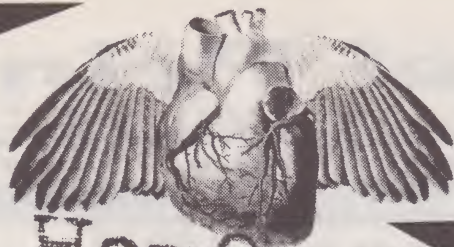
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Moving Forward: Program for a Participatory Economy

by Michael Albert
AK Press

For over 10 years, Michael Albert and his sometime collaborator Robin Hahnel have been working to refine a vision of participatory economics or "parecon" in a series of books, interviews, and articles. *Moving Forward* is the latest print contribution to this project.

In each section of the book Alberts offers an outline of his position, and then anticipates objections and responds to them in a question-and-answer-style format. The book avoids specialized and technical discussions, aiming instead to offer the broad outlines of the position. Readers interested in a more technical discussion of parecon in terms of economic theory would be wise to turn to Albert and Hahnels *The Political Economy of Participatory Economics*. But the basics are spelled out clearly in *Moving Forward*.

Albert argues that 1) that we should pay people according to their effort, sacrifice, and need *and not according to actual contribution to the economy*; 2) that we should strive for democratic self-management, while acknowledging that there will be times when it is most appropriate for the good of a society to delegate decision-making to a particular group that may have some kind of expertise; 3) that preserving the dignity of work will require getting rid of job descriptions as we know them today; and 4) that we need to strike a balance between the law of the market and potentially totalitarian state control of the economy with what he calls "participatory planning," in which groups of workers, or

even conceivably representatives of organizations, would work together to plan the economy in both the short and the long term, balancing peoples needs and desires with their abilities to produce. Obviously, Albert's arguments are more sophisticated than I can present here, but this should give you a good idea of his approach.

My main criticism of *Moving Forward* is that its view of culture is a bit too underdeveloped. For instance, Albert too quickly concedes that a participatory economy would need to make room for Mozart-like geniuses (though he does argue that support for art and artists, too, should be debated as a social good). Yet, the very notion of the artistic genius is in part a product of capitalism. Presumably a participatory economy would go with a participatory culture. To follow through on the music example, many cultures around the world assume that *everyone* will be a musician at some point or another in their lives. Musical performance is a more massive and infinitely more participatory endeavor than the Western concert tradition where the lone genius guides the orchestra. I don't mean to digress into music in order to nitpick, but rather to argue that in rethinking the economy, we must also rethink culture as well. You cannot change one without changing the other.

Despite whatever quibbles I may offer, however, Albert's *Moving Forward* is an immensely readable book. Though I am not entirely satisfied with Albert's program, I am very pleased that he has offered it. I look forward to a moment when leftists can once again engage in a serious and earnest debate over the good life. *Moving Forward* takes us one step closer. —Jonathan Sterne

This is Serbia Calling: Rock 'N' Roll Radio and Belgrade's Underground Resistance

By Matthew Collin
Serpent's Tail

Serbian authoritarianism under Milosevic was perfect for beefcake photos of nude crewcut fighters, with their glistening and flexing oiled muscles and machine guns on display. Serbian politics overdosed on testosterone and the heroism of charismatic death squad leaders-cum-gangsters like Arkan, head of the Tigers militia.

On the other side, as Semezdin Mehmedinovic describes in *Sarajevo Blues*, the Muslim victims in Bosnia were hiding away from shrapnel in shelters made of library books. Serbia's official self-portrait was as the front line of Western civilization against Muslim invasion, but the barbarism lay within.

And it's almost certainly still there. Serb nationalists who believe that only NATO prevented their triumph are now sitting at home unemployed, embittered and enraged. Even though the current Kostunica government has sent Milosevic to the Hague, a sacrificial figure for a non-atonement, there is every reason to believe that those same nationalist forces are awaiting their first opportunity to re-emerge. Defeat does not mean disappearance; it is a prelude to violence.

This alone is a good reason to read Matthew Collin's *This is Serbia Calling*, which interleaves histories of the Milosevic government, the Balkan wars, and the alternative station Radio B92. The book tells the joint stories of rock broadcasting and

political activism, one that concludes triumphantly with Milosevic's electoral overthrow in October 2000.

Collin does a good job historicizing Radio B92's inadvertent birth in 1989 from a Communist Party effort to achieve hipness by sponsoring a temporary youth radio station and providing transmitter access. Afterwards, the new station stayed on the air and in tune with European pirate radio, broadcasting grunge and punk together with provocative radical talk shows. Its early anarchic tendencies and organizational splits faded behind a need to confront the growing power of the Milosevic forces, which emphasized control of the state broadcast media in order to obtain electoral support.

Surprisingly, Radio B92 kept the airwaves full of both good music and counternews throughout most of Milosevic's reign. The station was too popular among youth to risk shutting down. Only in March 1999, when NATO bombing raids began in response to the Kosovo crisis, did the Milosevic government finally take control. B92 continued reporting via its website, which was running at a million hits daily, but this medium meant the station was serving a global rather than a Serbian audience.

Collin wears his sympathies on his sleeve, the sympathies of an anti-Milosevic writer who is deeply attached to progressive and democratic Serbian political forces. But there are two major problems with his narrative. The first is that he remains deeply invested in the notion of rock-as-liberation. Is it sufficient politics to play some great rock albums when Srebrenica is being butchered? The second problem is that the triumphal conclusion Collin supplies for the book sets readers up to believe that the ideas and ethos of the Milosevic era have been defeated and permanently marginalized.

In the end, Radio B92 was a contradiction. It was an anti-Milosevic voice that broadcast products of the global music

industry and received collaborative assistance from Western governments, and yet unquestionably represented an oppositional voice against internal and external hegemonies in the Balkans. Whatever its blindspots, Collin's book makes us appreciate the significance of this cultural force.

—Joe Lockard

Obsolete Communism: The Left-Wing Alternative

Daniel and Gabriel Cohn-Bendit
AK Press

Reviewing *Obsolete Communism* presents the same paradox as writing it did. The student-led uprising that swept France in May 1968 was self-consciously decentered. But people have a hard time understanding political action that has not been planned, so a center was manufactured. As Daniel Cohn-Bendit writes in the introduction to this book, "strange that a movement opposed to all leaders should have ended up with one all the same, that those who shun the limelight should be singled out for the full glare of publicity."

This reads a little like the "No" of a person who protests too much. Part of the problem is that the book fuses a narrative of that storied May with a wide-ranging critique of party politics. Cohn-Bendit's basic point, familiar to many of us today, but more novel in the months after the revolt, is that the French Communist Party did everything in its power to preserve the status quo. He insists that this did not represent a betrayal of the party, but its fulfillment. It is the nature of any political party, he argues, to divide people into leaders and followers. So long as people do not have control over their own lives, there will never be a true revolution. Or, as The Who memorably put it, "Meet the new boss, same as the old boss."

But Cohn-Bendit is not blind to his

own rise to promise. To explain it, he deploys the category of revolutionary: "We are convinced that the revolutionary cannot and must not be a leader." That he is trying to describe himself here becomes clear when you read a statement he made in an interview from June, 1968, included here as an appendix: "I will never lead anything. I will never tell people what to do. What they want to do they will do, and what they don't want to do they won't." It's hard not to admire such steadfast commitment to worker control, particularly when you consider that Cohn-Bendit's subsequent political work with the Green Party in his native Germany has shown him to be a man of his words. You can almost feel his excitement when he writes about the local Action Committees in the revolt, "Whose power of united action was in no way diminished by the absence of leaders at the top."

I wonder, though, whether Cohn-Bendit does himself justice. The most dramatic success of the student movement in the 1960s was a radical rethinking of education. Radical teachers struggled to find a way to reconcile their distrust of leadership with the realization that students need direction. The best of them set an example that complicates Cohn-Bendit's distinction between "leader" and "revolutionary." His book does the same thing. Even though it's rooted in a moment that is rapidly fading from view, it doesn't feel dated at all. It could easily have been written as a reflection on the Battle of Seattle and subsequent protests against free-market globalization. In short, it leads readers to political consciousness without leading them astray. Reflecting on the irony that a major publisher wanted his book, Cohn-Bendit concludes that, "they hope, perhaps, that the revolution will be abortive—my readers may be among those to prove them wrong." Many abortions later, the hope lives on. Become those readers. —Charlie Bertsch

All books reviewed in Punk Planet are independently published by small or academic presses. Due to space constraints and length requirements, not all books we receive will be reviewed, as it takes quite a bit more time to read & review a book (and write the corresponding review) than it does to plunk a needle down on a record and write a snappy capsule. If you'd like to have your book reviewed in Punk Planet, please mail it to: Punk Planet attn: Book Reviews PO Box 464 Chicago IL 60690.

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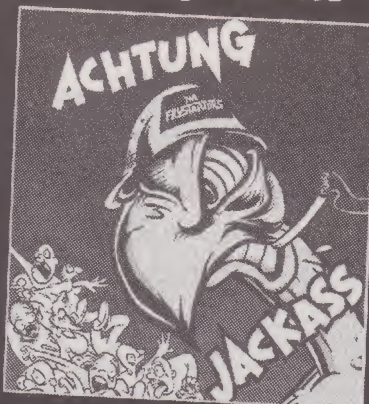
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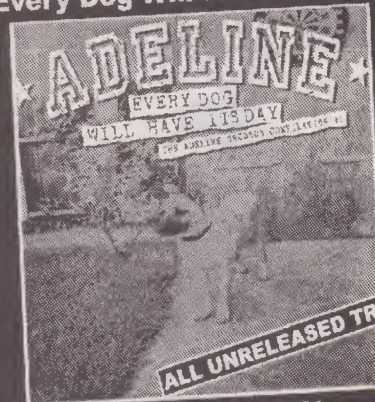
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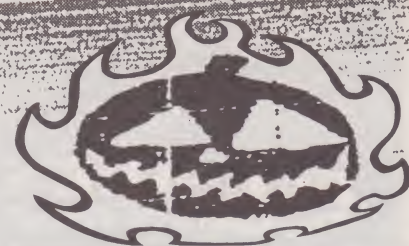
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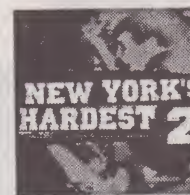
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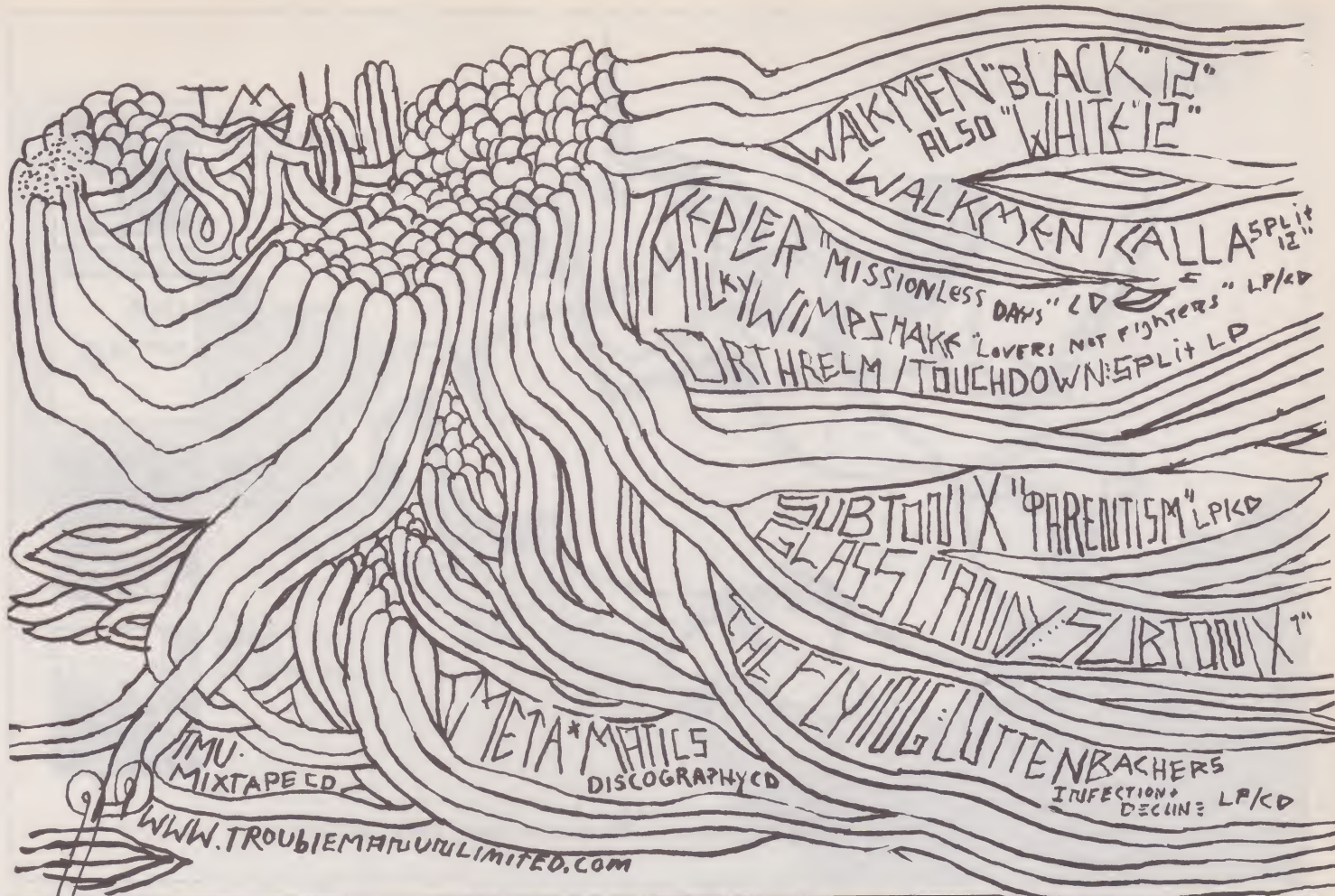
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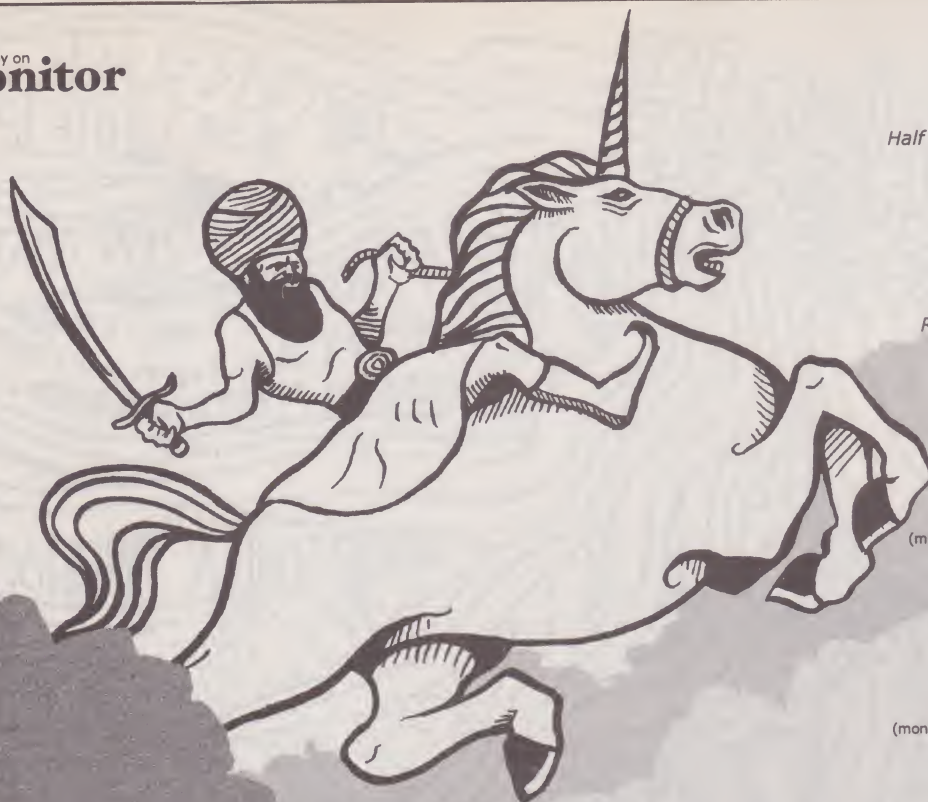
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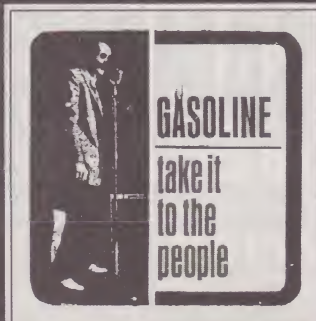
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PP39 Sept/Oct 2000 Six years after punk "broke" into the mainstream, Punk Planet talks to many of the bands involved. GREEN DAY, JAWBREAKER, JAWBOX, SAMIAM, GIRLS AGAINST BOYS, THE SMOKING POPE, FACE TO FACE, JIMMY EAT WORLD, TEXAS IS THE REASON. Think you know what happened? Think again. Also in this issue: interviews with KILL ROCK STARS founder SLIM MOON; THE EXPLOSION; MARY TIMONY; SUE COE; ULTRA-RED; DIS-INFO.COM; and the CENTRAL OHIO ABORTION ACCESS FUND. Articles in this issue include a look at how groups like the WTO ARE EFFECTING THE LIVES OF THE GREAT APES; a report on the CHICAGO POST-ROCK SCENE; and noted economist Doug Henwood writes "BOOM FOR WHOM" which puts a new perspective on the "new" economy. 152 pgs

PP40 November/December '00. MEET THE NEW BOSS Through interviews with controversial biographers, Punk Planet #40 envisions the hell that the Bush presidency will be—and the hell that a Gore presidency would have been. PP40 also features interviews with INSOUND.COM; The Fucking Champs' TIM GREEN; ELECTRIC AUDIO; Anarchist theorist JOHN ZERZAN; MARCELLE DIALLO; VERSO BOOKS; MILEMARKER; and MATMOS. Articles in PP40 include a look at the WAR THE GOVERNMENT IS WAGING AGAINST THE NAVAJO INDIANS in Big Mountain, AZ, the PLIGHT OF C NUMBER PRISONERS IN ILLINOIS and a look back at WELFARE REFORM. 152 pgs.

PP41 February 2000 PUTTING DC ON THE MAP. PP41 takes a look at the history of the DC punk scene. From the influence of the Bad Brains to the birth of Minor Threat; from a violent Ian MacKaye to a not-yet-Rollins Henry Garfield. PP41 offers a revealing and detailed look into punk's past. Interviews in pp41 include: (INTERNATIONAL) NOISE CONSPIRACY, THE WIPERS, THE LOCUST, TNI BOOKS, and DIY reggae pioneers RAS RECORDS. Articles in PP41 include a look at POETRY SLAMS and a devastating look at the BOMBING OF A COLOMBIAN VILLAGE. Additionally in PP41 is an inspiring talk with SUE

MECCA, a 40-year-old punk rock mom. Plus, DIY tips, columns, reviews and much, much more. 144 pgs.

PP42 FINDING LIFE ON DEATH ROW These unique conversations with three people who have been sent to death row (two are still there) bring readers beyond the numbers and into the cell itself. Interviews in this issue include: AMPHETAMINE REPTILE RECORDS calls it quits, SAMIAM, JETS TO BRAZIL'S JEREMY CHATELAIN talks about his solo work, filmmaker ANDREW DICKSON, members of the powerful Seattle band THE GITS look back at the death of their singer Mia, and hip-hop culture mag BLU keeps it real. Also interviewed in PP42 is ALI ABUNIMAH, a young Palestinian activist who has helped turn the media tide during the latest Arab uprising in Israel. Articles in PP42 include a look at the growing anti-psychiatry movement—are drug companies convincing us we're sick in order to turn a profit. The revealing DIARY OF A PHONE SEX WORKER lets readers peer into the world on the other side of the receiver. And PEDAL POWER chronicle's one woman's travels into the radical pro-bike movement. PP42 also includes all the columns, reviews, DIY and more that you've loved over the years. 136 pgs.

PP43 BECOME THE MEDIA PP43's 36 page cover section gives readers DIY tips on how to edit digital video, how to set up a low-power radio station, how to record audio, how to program HTML, how to build a web-based audio feed, how to shoot video, how to program Flash animations and much, much more. In addition to those tips BECOME THE MEDIA also looks at the history of the INDEPENDENT MEDIA CENTER, who are setting the media world on end. BECOME THE MEDIA also features pieces about YOUTH MEDIA, the ZAPATISTAS AND TECHNOLOGY, NEWSREEL, and COMMUNITY ACTIVIST TECHNOLOGY. This issue is a must have for anyone interested in the new media revolution. Also featured in PP43 are interviews with radical historian HOWARD ZINN, rockers ROCKET FROM THE CRYPT

(fresh off being dumped from a major label), "emo diaries" kingpin DEEP ELM RECORDS, author SHAWNA KENNY, who wrote I WAS A TEENAGE DOMINATRIX, laptop rocker KID 606, religious zealots THE CAUSEWAY WAY, and the masterminds behind the PUPPET STREET PROJECT. Additionally, PP43 features all the stuff readers have come to expect over the last seven years: columns, reviews, and much more. 144 pgs.

PP44 THE WEAKERTHANS, one of the finest punk outfits to come along in the last few years grace the cover of PP44. This interview, performed by longtime Punk Planet contributor Larry Livermore, probes the mind of Weakerthans frontman JOHN SAMSON. In their conversation, Livermore and Samson go from poetry to revolution and back again. Truly an engaging and inspiring talk with one of punk's newest heroes. Also interviewed in this issue: MR LADY RECORDS is profiled through talks with the label owners and the artists they release; futuristic hip-hop duo DELTRON 3030; Pacific Northwest metal punk LORDS OF LIGHTSPEED; electronic music pioneer THOMAS DIMUZIO; HALF JAPANESE's legendary JAD FAIR; Pacific Northwest polit-rockers THE INTIMA; and \$5 CD label PLAN-IT-X RECORDS. Articles this issue include: UNIVERSAL RECORD'S ACQUISITION OF E-MUSIC—it may not sound all that exciting, but this business-section errata finds many independent labels not so independent anymore; reporter Heather Haddon looks at the ABUSE OF FEMALE PRISONERS IN AMERICA; new associate editor Chris Ziegler gives a hilarious behind-the-scenes look at SOUTH BY SOUTHWEST; PP investigates SLAUGHTER OF WILD BUFFALO IN MONTANA; and PUNKS REMEMBER JOEY RAMONE in a moving tribute. All this, plus all the DIY, columns, reviews, and much much much more! 144 pgs.

PP45 DOUBLE FEATURE cover story! This issue not only shines the spotlight on consumer-rights activist, 2000 presidential candidate, and all-around hellraiser RALPH NADER, but it also features an in-depth interview with uncon-

promising independents SHELLAC. Just for you, PP45 serves up a little double trouble—two cover stories for the price of one! Also interviewed in this issue: Latino punk entertainer EL VEZ; author PLESANT GEHMAN; analog electronic rockers MOUSE ON MARS; the new band to emerge from the ashes of Smart Went Crazy, THE BEAUTY PILL; queer zinemaker RUDY SCUTTER; filmmaker STEPHANIE BLACK; and independent country-rock and death-penalty activist STEVE EARL. Articles in this issue include a hair-raising look at THE YAZOO BACKWATER PUMP PROJECT IN THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA—these pumps, if built, could bring environmental devastation to this fragile region; BACK TO SHATILLA follows author Ali Abunimah as he visits a Palestinian refugee camp; and HONDURAS: THE OTHER COLUMBIA looks at the US's secret involvement in the Honduran government's war against its own people. Plus columns, reviews, DIY and much, much more! 144 pgs

PP46 ART & DESIGN 2! PP46 features FOUR LIMITED EDITION COVERS this time by artists JAIME HERNANDEZ (LOVE & ROCKETS COMICS), SHEPARD FAIRY (OBEY GIANT POSTERS), NIKKI MCCLURE (Olympia, WA paper-cut artist) and JAY RYAN (Chicago, IL poster artist). Interviews in Art & Design 2 include Hernandez, Fairy, McClure, and Ryan along with filmmaker SADIE SHAW, designer ELLIOT EARLES, graffiti artists JOCYLIN SUPERSTAR and LITTLE MISS ATTITUDE, San Francisco's not-for-profit POND GALLERY, and CRASS collageist GEE VAUCHER. Articles in A&D2 include a profile of CHICAGO'S RADICAL STREET ARTISTS THE DEPARTMENT OF SPACE AND LAND RECLAMATION, an overview of DIY COMICS, a story about the MURALS OF CHICAGO'S PILSEN NEIGHBORHOOD, and a look at the PROJECT MOBILVIRE/BOOKMOBILE PROJECT that is bringing zines and artist books into underserved neighborhoods. Plus reviews, columns, DIY and more. 168 pgs.

PP47 WAR SONGS. Punk Planet #47 takes stock of the Bush administration's WAR AGAINST TERRORISM. Is it effective? Is it moral? Is it legal?

We pose the questions that the mainstream media isn't asking to experts—the answers are eye-opening to say the least. PP47 dedicates an entire section to looking at the war from many different angles in interviews, essays, and articles. Sure to be controversial, PP47 pulls no punches in its analysis of the war. But it's not just bombs and tanks in this issue of Punk Planet—after taking an issue off to write about art & design, PP47 returns with tons of great music interviews. Interviewed in this issue are: classic queer punk TOM ROBINSON reminisces on the spirit of 77; Pacific Northwest stalwarts UNWOUND; the Indigo Girls' AMY RAY talks about her independent solo project; dyke punks THE HAGGARD take their bikes out for a spin; buzz band THURSDAY drops some knowledge; XBXR gives their last interview; and Punk Planet helps MINT RECORDS celebrate their 10 year anniversary. Also interviewed just in time for the Olympics: the BURN THE OLYMPICS collective—a secretive group of activists devoted to direct action against the 2002 Olympic Games. In addition to the war coverage, and tons of interviews, PP47 features reviews, columns, fiction, DIY and more.

PP48 TO HELL AND BACK. Operating under the name George Eric Hawthorne, George Burdi was the flag-bearer and general of the mid-'90s neo-nazi youth movement. But a 1995 jail term found Burdi questioning his own beliefs, and when he was free, he left the neo-nazi movement. In "To Hell and Back", Punk Planet 48 catches up with Burdi to talk about his past, his transformation, and his future. Controversial and disturbing, yet ultimately moving, this feature-length interview is not to be missed! Also interviewed in this issue: the unstoppable women-led band ERASE ERRATA; garage rock genre jumpers THE DIRTBOMBS; electronic sound artist OVAL; Afro-beat radicals ANTIBALAS; street punk superstars THE SWINGING UTTERS; and radical educator and poet DEMETRI MARTINEZ. Any articles in PP48? You betcha. Punk Planet looks at the DEATH OF DISTRIBUTION GIANT VALLEY and what the loss of a giant one-stop means for independents. PP travels to look at the FAILED DOLLARIZATION OF ECUADOR; and

Andrew Dickson talks about TOURING WITH A DIY FILM. Need more? How about a DIY ON TRAVELLING AND WORKING ABROAD, plus columns, reviews, and much, much more.

PP49 BUSINESS AS USUAL? THE ROCKY RISE OF VAGRANT RECORDS Very few labels in the underground have had the meteoric success of California's Vagrant Records—nor the controversy that has come with it. In issue #49, Punk Planet turns its award-winning reporting to investigating Vagrant's business practices. Is the label's reputation for predatory band signings and larger-than-life marketing just sour grapes from competitors (as the label claims) or the emergence of a dangerous wolf in sheep's clothing (as its harshest critics contend)? And what does Vagrant's focus on Soundscan numbers, corporate sponsorships, and balls-out marketing campaigns mean for the underground? Reporters Trevor Kelley and Kyle Ryan (author of PP39's "The Crash" exposé on the 1994 punk signing boom) go beyond the rumors and delve into the fascinating story of the controversial punk label. ALSO IN PP49: Interviews with punk pioneers MIKE WATT and RICHARD HELL, rock 'n' rollers FEDERATION X, neo-wavers THE RAPTURE, nobel laureate (no kidding!) ADOLFO PEREZ, electronic underground mag XLR8R, buzz band NEW END ORIGINAL, Brits ELECTRELANE, and the always entertaining HOT WATER MUSIC. Articles (besides the cover story) include the story of Alex Sanchez, a LOS ANGELES GANG-PEACE ORGANIZER FACING DEPORTATION; the story of THE CIVIL SUIT AGAINST TWO SALVADORIAN GENERALS WHO NOW LIVE IN FLORIDA; and A FIRST PERSON ACCOUNT OF BEING "BANNED" FROM THE UNITED STATES POST-SEPTEMBER 11. All this plus columns, DIY, reviews, and much, much more.

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James Mumm

James Mumm works for the Organization of the North East (ONE), which is building a Successful, Multi-ethnic, mixed-economic community in Uptown and Edgewater.

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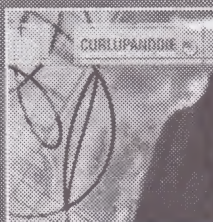
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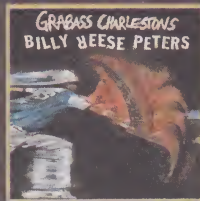
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photo by Matt Bidwell

punk planet 50
 July & August '02

"It's almost like there's some sort of social sanctioning in Chicago where the norm is to be fairly honest and straight with people."

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